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CHURCH IN ASIA TOWARDS NEW ECUMENICAL STRUCTURES

**Edited by
Kuncheria Pathil**

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jeevadhara

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

CHURCH IN ASIA

TOWARDS NEW ECUMENICAL STRUCTURES

Edited by
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Editorial

Pope John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* has proposed that “the National Episcopal Conferences in Asia invite other Christian Churches to join in a process of prayer and consultation in order to explore the possibilities of new ecumenical structures and associations to promote Christian Unity” (*Church in Asia*, no. 30). It is, indeed, a very welcoming and promising proposal where we could see the call of the Spirit and the signs of the times. The Ecumenical Movement from its very inception realized the need of having some ecumenical structures to express the common life and mission of the Churches. It is all the more necessary in Asia on several counts: First, Christianity is a very tiny minority in Asia and divisions among the Churches negatively affect the credibility and effectiveness of its mission and witness. Secondly, all the Churches in Asia today face common challenges and problems and they need stronger bonds for closer collaboration. Thirdly, all Asian societies are today undergoing radical transformation, and it is the ecumenical task of the Churches to animate and enhance this process with the authentic Gospel / human values. This Number of *Jeevadhara* is an invitation to the Asian Churches to initiate this process of exploring the possibilities of creating new ecumenical structures in view its mission in Asia today.

All ecclesial and ecumenical structures are meant for the effective fulfillment of the mission of the Church. Hence all discussions on the ecumenical structures must begin with the present challenges and tasks of the Mission of the Church in Asia. Michael Amaladoss highlights some important aspects of the mission of the Church in Asia in the 21st century. Church's primary mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God which Jesus had announced and fulfilled through his mission and ministry. In Jesus we find the full realization of the Kingdom of God. Through his words, deeds and through his very Person he communicated to all people the fruits of the Kingdom. The Kingdom begins to realize in persons and communities when they respond to God's Word and let themselves be transformed by the values of the Kingdom, such as love, justice, freedom and fellowship.

Any rethinking and reform of Ecumenical Structures in Asia should start with the study and evaluation of the existing structures. The present editor in his article on “Ecumenical Structures in Asia” introduces to our readers the two important Ecumenical Structures or Organizations

in Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). They are today functioning as parallel organizations with very similar or almost identical programs. In recent years both these bodies have realized the tremendous need and urgency for mutual support and collaboration. Ecumenically minded Christians in Asia look forward to that day when the FABC and CCA merge together and transform themselves in creating a new ecumenical structure or organization in Asia so that all the Churches in Asia may give a common witness and manifest visibly their fundamental unity in Jesus Christ.

"National Councils of Churches" are new ecumenical structures emerged mainly during the second part of the 20th century. Today there are 103 National Councils of Churches in the world, and in 58 of them the Catholic Church is a full member. Tom Michel SJ introduces here the question of the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the National Councils of Churches. National Councils of Churches have no authority over the member Churches, but are common forums for collaboration and joint-search for the visible unity of the Churches.

Two models of the National Councils of Churches are presented in this Number, one by David Gill on the "National Council of Churches in Australia", and the other by Packiam Thumbaraj Samuel on the "National Council of Churches in India". The present structure of the National Council of Churches in Australia was formed in 1994 with 14 member Churches. The entry of the Roman Catholic Church in the National Council of Churches of Australia was an important step and a great ecumenical event in Australia. The National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon was formed in 1923, and in 1979 it was transformed into "National Council of Churches in India" (NCCI) with the membership of 29 Churches, 14 Regional Christian Councils and several other All India Christian Organizations and related agencies. But the Catholic Churches in India have not yet joined the National Council of Churches in India. In my opinion, it is time that the Catholic Churches in India entered into a serious discussion on the question of the relationship between them and the NCCI.

All historical structures, whether ecclesial or ecumenical, have to be flexible and open. They have to be subjected to continuous change, reform and revision according to the changing times and needs. Otherwise, they will become redundant, irrelevant and even obstacles to the mission of the Church. Instead of enhancing the mission, they will rather stifle initiatives and creativity of the Churches.

Missionary Challenges in Asia

Michael Amaladoss

Why Christianity could not make an impact on Asia even after 2000 years of its existence? Understanding the reasons for this failure is the first missionary challenge, affirms Michael Amaladoss in this incisive article. He explains how the developed cultures and religions of Asia stand as missionary challenges today and proposes three priorities to meet these challenges: struggling for justice with the poor and dialoguing with the cultures and religions of Asia. It is an irony of history, he laments, that Christianity, born in Asia, has had to come back later to Asia via Europe as a foreign product!

Asia is a vast continent where nearly half the population of the world lives. It is the cradle of all the world's great religions, including Christianity. It can boast of rich cultures which have histories that go back to more than 4000 years. With its variety of ethnic groups it is a mosaic of humanity. Pluralism is its natural characteristic and harmony has been the goal of its major cultural and religious traditions. Its 'mysteries' have always tempted the outsiders. Trade relations, using sea and land routes, can be traced back to the time before the Common Era. its relations to the West have been tense in the past five hundred years. Two years ago was the 5th centenary of the landing of Vasco da Gama in the south of India looking for a new sea route to the East, since the traditional route had been blocked by Islam in the Middle East. That started a period of colonialism under which many Asian countries have suffered and are suffering. The era of economic globalization and dominance, supported by military- might, has followed the colonial era. The recent collapse of the 'Tiger' economies of Asia has highlighted this dependence. On the other hand the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism may have influenced the Philosophers of the ancient Near East and Greece like Pythagoras. Asian spiritualities still prove attractive to many in the West.

Christianity has been in Asia for 2000 years. Christian traders were on the trade routes that went from the Middle East into Asia in the early centuries of the Christian era. With the colonial enterprise many new waves of missionaries came to different parts of Asia from the 16th century onwards. And yet only less than 2% of Asians are Christians. This is very unlike the conversion movements in Latin America and Africa. Understanding the reasons for this is perhaps the first missionary challenge. If we do not try to understand this, our discernment of contemporary challenges would be inaccurate. Without making an elaborate enquiry, I think we can say that the reasons why Christianity did not have an impact on Asia, as it did elsewhere, are the developed cultures and religions of Asia. Christianity never cared to take these seriously till recent years and it has always been seen, as an unwelcome foreign element. We shall have to keep this in mind as we explore the contemporary challenges.

An Interpretative Key

Discerning the missionary challenges in such a situation is not an easy task, unless we have a key for interpretation. I suggest two criteria. Today we understand the goal of mission as the building up of the Kingdom of God and of the Church as its symbol and servant. The Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is a human community of freedom and fellowship, of justice and love. It brings release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, healing to the sick, food to the hungry, conversion of heart to the sinner and peace to all people of good will. It is not merely life after death, but also *life before death*: life in communion with every one and with God; life that remains a symbol of hope even in the midst of poverty and suffering; life that they are called to create in the power of the Spirit. It is being built up here and now, though its fullness is in the eschatological future. The second criterion was spelt out by the Asian Bishops in Taipei in 1974. They said that evangelization in Asia was a threefold dialogue with realities of Asia, namely the poor, the rich cultures and the great religions. This means that we do not import readymade structures of 'salvation' from somewhere, but we let the people of Asia dialogue with the Good News in a creative and relevant way. Keeping these criteria in mind, let us take a brief look at the situation in Asia today.

The Asian Situation

Barring a few countries like Japan, Asia is a poor continent. It had been thoroughly exploited by the colonialists for four centuries and now continues to be exploited by the locally dominant groups, often hand-in-glove with their partners in the First World. Political colonialism may have disappeared, but economic colonialism continues in various forms. The contemporary manifestation of it is the phenomenon of globalization, which means the control of the globe by a few multinationals, invoking the *mantra* of liberal economics and free trade and aided by their governments and by international financial and trade institutions. Though most Asian countries have registered some overall economic progress, the gap between the rich and the poor has been increasing and the poor are becoming poorer.

At the political level, people do not really have any role in decision making. Most Asian countries are controlled by strong governments, supported by the army. In countries where there is a façade of democracy, the state is controlled by the few rich and powerful. Periodic elections do not really enable people to participate in making the decisions that concern them. Politics has become a game. Corruption is rampant in most countries in Asia.

Society is deeply divided. The caste system that marginalizes millions as outcastes is still strong in South Asia. The Native peoples are exploited and suppressed everywhere. Feudal structures with big land lords continue in many countries. The socially marginalized suffer multiple oppression: they are also economically poor and politically powerless. The women are exploited and oppressed in various ways from female infanticide to dowry deaths. Under the impact of industrialization and urbanization the family structures that have been the backbone of Asia are breaking down. Factors like child labour, sex tourism, economic migration, etc. are breaking up traditional values and relationships.

Asian cultures withstood the impact of westernization. But their self-assertion and pride seem to go with an inferiority complex. However, they are not equally strong to withstand the impact of modernization. The culture of consumerism spread by the mass media is bringing about a certain secularization and socially destructive values like individualism, competition, materialism, egoism, etc. Fascist movements like Hindutva are fighting a rearguard battle.

Religions in Asia have become causes of conflict. Faced by the onslaught of the secularism, materialism and atheistic humanism promoted by scientific and technological modernity, some religious groups have become fundamentalist seeking secure roots in religious convictions. In the struggle for power and for scarce resources in a post-colonial situation politicians are making use of religion as a political tool. Post-colonial movements of nationalism also have sought roots in religious identity. The result is that inter-religious conflicts and riots are on the increase. Often they are also guises for inter-ethnic and economic conflicts. Religions lose their prophetic force and tend to legitimize such conflicts, strengthening them with religious sanction either encouraging *jihad* or glorifying martyrdom in defence of the faith.

All is not gloom however. One can also see the Spirit of God active among peoples. There are many subaltern movements in Asia today that show that the people are waking up to the situation and are starting to agitate for their rights. Dalits (untouchables in the caste system), native peoples, women, workers and even ordinary consumers are challenging injustice in various ways. Ecological movements are taking root. People are demanding a greater participation in making political decisions that affect them. Subaltern cultures seek to carve out a special space for themselves in the public sphere. Counter-cultural groups may be small, but very active, making skillful use of the media for networking nationally and internationally.

An Option for Justice and the Poor

Poverty, injustice and oppression are not new in the world. The forms they are taking today may be new. The Gospel does not favour a particular economic or political system. But it stands for values like freedom, equality, justice, participatory democracy, community, etc. In the ongoing struggle between the rich and the poor, it stands by the poor. It is God's own option as it is manifest in the Bible. This option has a double dimension: *being poor* and *working with and for* the poor. It is the teaching, not only of Jesus, but also of other Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, that one cannot successfully fight against the forces of egoism and greed if one is not oneself egoless and free of attachment. The blessedness of being poor is a challenge to every one. It is only when we are poor in this sense that we can struggle with and for the poor for liberation from the poverty imposed on them. Opting *to be* poor and *for the* poor are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same attitude. It is only in so far as one is free from Mammon that one can free others from it.

The Church in Asia has a record of being *with* the poor. It has engaged in developmental activities of all kinds like education, health and projects for economic betterment. But this activity of the Church is limited to a small group of volunteers like the Religious. The aid they offer is not the outcome of their sacrifice and sharing or those of the local Church, but funds from foreign benefactors. Even while they help the poor, they have a lot of resources. Hence the question: Can the Church claim to *be* poor? The Church-as-people in Asia is largely poor. But the Church-as-institution seems to be rich and to have, in the eyes of others, inexhaustible sources of income. One sometimes has the impression that the Church hesitates to be prophetic in order to protect its institutions or its sources of income. Many of these institutions were begun for the poor. Now they serve largely the rich and the middle class people. Can the Church claim to be *for* the poor, struggling and fighting on their side for their liberation? One can certainly identify generous individuals or groups here and there or special occasions like the popular revolution in the Philippines that overthrew Marcos. But these seem exceptions rather than the rule. The Church as a small minority tends to be self-defensive and to collaborate with whoever is actually in power. Most social activists, who work with the poor, are usually shunned by the official Church -- at the most, they are tolerated.

One of the reasons for this is that the Church has an image of itself as a minister of salvation through sacramental celebrations. Some acts of charity as a sign of good faith are recommended. But one is not encouraged to get involved in political action of any kind. Long ago Gandhi said that the person who thinks that religion has no relation to politics does not know what religion means. We can only hold up the image and life of Jesus to justify action with and on behalf of the poor.

That the Church is small in numbers is no excuse for refusing to get involved in liberative movements. It need not start its own movements. It is not a political party. But there are any number of liberative movements with which the Christians can collaborate. Another problem is that when we think of the Church we think only of the hierarchy. Since we do not wish to mix religion and politics in the context of widespread communalism in Asia, we may not appreciate the officials and ritual specialists of a religious community getting involved in political action. But this need not deter Christians from collaborating with all people of good will to promote justice and peace in the world and to liberate the poor.

Poverty is not only economic. The spirit of poverty leads to humility. Jesus' *kenosis* is our model. Jesus came as a servant and washed the feet of the disciples. But I have the impression that our preferred image of Jesus in our missionary action has been that of Christ the King who conquers and dominates. As followers of Jesus the servant, the Church too can be a servant, both of the Gospel that it proclaims and of the people to whom it is proclaimed.

The core of mission is prophetic action for liberation and every other task of the Church is significant only in so far as it contributes to it. Authentic prophecy is critical of the present, but with reference to a vision of the future that inspires hope and provokes action. This is the meaning of saying that the Church is essentially missionary. The challenge for the Church in Asia is therefore to rediscover this missionary dynamism, not to focus narrowly in building itself up as a sacramental community of those who are 'saved'.

An Asian Church in Dialogue with Asian Cultures

The Church in Asia cannot credibly evangelize and work for the Kingdom if it is not authentically Asian. Unfortunately the Church still has a foreign image. The subaltern groups that have become Christian may even be happy with it and the international contact that it brings. The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for the Church to become a local Church. The need for what came to be later known as inculturation was very much stressed, not only in the field of liturgy, but in all other areas. But apart from the translation of some texts into local languages and some adaptation of dress patterns and decorative symbols nothing much has happened.

The Church needs to become local at least in three areas: financially, culturally and in responsibility. The Churches in Asia are not financially autonomous, but still largely dependent on foreign funds. A certain sharing of material goods between peoples is welcome, especially if it helps the really poor and the needy and this sharing today can have international dimensions. Even St. Paul raised money from other communities to help the community in Jerusalem. But it is not normal that the community depends on foreign funds for its basic life and pastoral action. This means that we have set up structures that are beyond the real possibilities and needs of the community or that we are not adapting the structures to suit the communities. What kind of witness do poor Christians give when they are surrounded by rich

ministers, institutions and super-structures of training and administration? Will not some of the accusations that the Church is enticing the poor with material resources disappear, if the Christian communities and their ministers lived within their means? Does not financial dependence sometimes dictate what the Church does and how?

Every one in the Church today accepts theoretically the need for the Asian Churches to become Asian culturally and not merely in personnel. Unfortunately, this is not happening. Becoming Asian does not mean that we adapt or translate some putative perennial structures in a local idiom. The Church will become Asian when the people are free to respond to the Gospel in their particular socio-cultural context and express their response creatively in their own cultural idiom. This process will give rise to local theology, liturgy, spirituality and community structures. We do not have this freedom today and foreign structures still weigh heavily on us. We are alienated from our own cultures and we have no prophetic voice either in their transformation.

One of the great failures of Christian mission in Asia has been its inability to face the challenge of the great cultures of Asia, in spite of the heroic and pioneering efforts of Mateo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili. This has given rise to the phenomenon of double religiosity where popular religious practices and structures created spontaneously by the people coexist uneasily with official practices and structures. Even today its institutions, the 'convent schools' being symbols, are seen as purveyors of modern, but also 'western' culture.

How can a Church emerge as a local Church if it cannot take responsibility for its life and its creative action, for its organization and administrations. The free self-Church of China is not totally without meaning, even if the government's motives for promoting it may be suspect. I do not think that we have solved creatively the problem of the just autonomy of the local Churches within the communion of the universal Church. At the Synod for Asia some Bishops did courageously raise the issue of autonomy. But those voices were effectively ignored.

The dialogue of the Gospel with the local cultures does not stop with trying to adapt or translate the Gospel in the local cultural idiom. The Gospel is always a call to conversion. Dialoguing with a culture, it will challenge the culture to change its visions and values that are

not in harmony with Gospel values. For instance, in India the Gospel should have challenged the caste system, especially the oppression of the Dalits, the oppression of women, the unequal power systems in community organizations etc. From the time of Ricci and de Nobili, the Church made a distinction between religion and culture. While it substituted the local religion with its own creed and cult, it simply accepted the local social and cultural structures and practices, except where they interfered with the Church's own hierarchical structures and canon law. The Christians in Asia therefore live in between two cultural worlds. Their religious identity is foreign, but their social identity is mostly local. This means that religion is effectively cut off from society and therefore also loses the possibility of prophetically challenging it.

The Gospel also must be prophetic in Asia with regard to the global modern culture that is spreading consumer and materialist values through the media and the market. Even if Asians may not give up religion in their private lives, it is slowly disappearing from the public space, in so far as religious values are no longer influencing the spheres of economics and politics. Economic policy and practice is governed by the profit motive, while politics is guided by power. Both are pursued by whatever possible means. People are also more interested in having than in being. They have less concern for their families and society. Though science and technology are welcome for improving the quality of life, the way they are used leads to the destruction of nature and human life. Christians in Asia, because they are poor, may tend to see the positive side of modernity as providing opportunities for advancement in life. Even the kind of development that we promote may be detrimental to authentic human well-being and ecology. I think that there is here a whole new area that we have to attend to in mission.

If the Church does not become authentically Asian it cannot effectively and credibly witness to the Gospel in Asia. It is an irony of history that Christianity, born in Asia, has come back to Asia via Europe as a foreign product. The post-synodal document *The Church in Asia* makes much about the fact that Jesus was born an Asian. But its vision of Asian cultures do not lead it beyond translating the Gospel in the local cultural idioms. The very phrase "*The Church in Asia*" pretends that there is only one universal Church that is present every where, refusing to accept the vision that the one universal Church realizes itself in many local Churches so that we can speak about *Asian*

Churches. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the "Churches of Asia" (I Cor 16:19) and John wrote "to the seven Churches that are in Asia" (Rev 1:4).

Recent events, including the Synod for Asia and the document that followed it, make one suspect that there are efforts at increasing control of incipient manifestations of freedom and creativity in the local Churches of Asia.

Religions in Conflict or in Harmony?

The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is directed against the personal sinful forces of Satan and the social evil structures of Mammon. This is shown particularly by his life, his miracles and exorcisms, and his parables. Jesus did not preach against Judaism, but against its abuse by the social and religious elite of his day. But over the years the Church acquires an institutional structure and a social identity of its own. It thinks of itself as the Kingdom and looks at other cultures and religions, including Judaism, as forces opposed to the Kingdom. The Jews are even particularly targeted as having committed deicide. This has misdirected the priority in mission from struggle against Satan and Mammon to convert the members of other religions to Christianity. Only after the Second Vatican Council has the Church begun to speak of religious liberty and of dialogue with other religions. Even now dialogue with other religions is instrumentalized as a means to conversion.

All the religions are against materialism and egoism. They encourage justice and love. Ideally speaking they must be able to collaborate in the defence of common human and spiritual values, even if their reasons for it may be different. But as a matter of fact religions in Asia are actually in a conflictual mode. Religion is an important element of group identity. Therefore people belonging to other religions are perceived as 'other' and different from early childhood. This sense of otherness may already lead to ignorance and prejudice about the other, especially when it becomes stereotyped. It may be aggravated if it also represents an ethnic difference. Religions have an exclusive language, even when they are tolerant. Under pressure this could become fundamentalism. In situations of social tension religion is used as a political tool. It is simply a way of getting a group together and setting it against other groups on the supposition that people who share the same faith also share the same economic and political

interests. This is communalism. Once a conflict erupts, for whatever reason, then it becomes a memory of bitterness and hatred that both bind and blind people further. We are into a cycle of violence. There are always people who seem to escape this spiral of violence. But they are exceptions rather than the rule.

Christians do not stand apart from this situation. Being small minorities in most places they may be defensive rather than aggressive. Otherwise they too could be ignorant, prejudiced, fundamentalist, communalist and violent. The challenge here is how does one resolve conflicts and promote dialogue and collaboration.

People belonging to different religions who may be living together must discover themselves as a community with common interests and goals. Communalism is often promoted by elite leaders, who are not even practitioners of their religion, for their own needs of economic and/or political power. If some take the initiative, the poor can find that their problems and interest are common. These groups must be built slowly into common human communities.

At another level, people must be freed from their exclusive attitudes with regard to their religion. Today the Church accepts that the Spirit of God is present and active in other religions. However we may define our own specificity, we must respect the freedom of the other humans and the freedom of God working in them. We accept that we have a common vocation as human beings. We can therefore dialogue, learn from each other and collaborate, even while we keep witnessing to what we think our specificity is. Dialogue can take various forms like dialogue of life, of common action, of religious experience and of common reflection. But what is important is that there is dialogue.

We could go one step further and say that since we believe that it is the plan of God for the world to bring all things together (I Cor 15; Eph 1:3-10) we feel called in a special manner to promote dialogue and even serve as catalysts and peace makers between other groups.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, at their plenary assembly in Manila in January 1995, in which John Paul II was also present, affirm this dialogical perspective.

Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus' solidarity with humanity. With our Asian sisters and

brothers, we will strive to foster communion among Asian peoples who are threatened by glaring economic, social and political imbalances. With them we will explore ways of utilizing the gifts of our diverse religions, cultures and languages to achieve a richer and deeper Asian unity. We build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation.¹

But collaboration and dialogue are not easy. Many Christians are not ready. Changes in attitudes at the level of theologians and pastors do not percolate down to the people very quickly. The Christians in many Asian countries are very self-defensive and are not open to dialogue with other believers. In a highly stratified or multi-ethnic society conversion to Christianity may be a way of seeking a separate identity and dialogue seems threatening to that identity. Besides our would-be partners may not also be ready to dialogue with us. They do not forget so easily our proselytising ways in the past and, by some, even in the present. So they are suspicious of our motives. All these factors make dialogue a difficult challenge.

When we speak of dialogue between religions, certainly the division between the Churches does present itself as a scandal. I think that part of localising the Church is to transcend the divisions that we have inherited from the West. The union achieved by the Churches of South and North India, as well as the unity of the Protestant Churches in China, show a way to follow. Even if union will necessarily take time, there could be nothing that hinders a close collaboration in mission.

Conclusion - Priorities

The missionary challenges to the Asian Churches do indeed seem formidable. But we have hope. The Bishops of Asia suggest three reasons for this hope: their mission is the mission of God; Jesus himself resonates with Asia; the way of mission is not in power, but in weakness.

All life is related to the active presence of the Creator Spirit. Jesus ushers in the new creation, the fullness of life in God. As the Risen One, he breathes the Holy

1. *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol 2, p. 8.*

Spirit on his disciples (Jn. 20:22f), making them partakers of his life and mission.

This image of Jesus -- man of the creative Spirit, friend of God, person of interiority, bringer of harmony, lover of the poor, healer and liberator, bold prophet, suffering companion, victor over death, sharer of his Spirit -- resonates with the Asian peoples' vision of life.

We may hesitate because we are a minority group. Indeed we are a little flock in Asia. But it is from this position of weakness that God's gift of divine life in Jesus Crucified, the power and wisdom of God, is most significant. Triumphalism and displays of pomp and human power do not witness to the abnegation of Jesus on the Cross. It is often from our weakness that God's love as life-giving grace is more clearly made manifest.²

Should we look for any priorities among these challenges? Struggling for justice with the poor and dialoguing with cultures and religions are actually not three separate challenges among which we should look for priorities, but three inter-related dimensions of one and the same challenge. One could say that there is a focus among the three that unifies them in a structured way. This focus is the struggling with the poor for justice and building up a Kingdom community of freedom and fellowship, love, justice and peace. But we cannot change economic, political and social structures without changing the world views and value systems that underlie them, namely without transforming cultures. Cultures cannot be transformed if we do not tap the prophetic power of the religions. In a multi-religious society like Asia religions can transform the culture they share only by collaborating and working together. A person or a group may concentrate on one or other challenge according to their vocation and/or charism. In a particular place there may be an urgent need, which has to be discerned locally. But in general I think that we have to adopt a holistic approach always in the horizon of the Kingdom and open to the prompting of the Spirit.

Vidyajyothi

Delhi - 110054

2. *Ibid.*

Participation of the Roman Catholic Church in National Councils of Churches: an Historical Survey

Thomas Michel

Despite the importance of and necessity for the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in National Councils of Churches, scepticism on the advisability of it still prevails among a good many of the members of the R.C. Church. Undoubtedly, it is due to their ignorance and apprehension born out of bias. Through this article Thomas Michel dispels such apprehensions by clearly explaining the history, nature, and utility of such Councils today for their unifying and ecumenical thrust among Christian Churches vindicating the official position and attitude of the RCC in this respect.

The growth of national and regional Councils of Churches is one of the most dramatic phenomena arising from the Ecumenical movement in the past century. In 1900, no National Council of Churches existed anywhere in the world. Today, at the beginning of the 21st Century, there are at least 103 National Councils of Churches, located on every continent. Moreover, at the international level, several important regional conferences have been functioning for almost 40 years. At the other end of the spectrum, at the local level in cities, provinces, and states, countless local associations of Churches have been created. Christians reflecting on their faith must see in this rapid growth of Councils of Churches as one of the “signs of the times”, that is, one of the significant ways that the Holy Spirit is working among Christians to lead them to greater unity, fellowship, and service.

This article intends to examine one aspect of this phenomenon, the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the national Councils of Churches. Perhaps it would be good at the beginning to state exactly what we are talking about, that is, “to define our terms”.

1. What is a “National Council of Churches”?

A Council is an association of churches in a defined geographic area. It is a voluntary association in the sense that a Christian Church does not automatically belong to a Council simply by being located in a certain region. Churches are free to join and free, if they wish, to disassociate themselves from the Council. Belonging to a Council of Churches does not compromise the distinctive identity and authority of each Church, but is meant to encourage common reflection on matters of faith, to promote cooperative action on matters that touch on Christian unity and ethical issues, and to foster common action in programs of Christian witness and service to the needs of human society. Each member Church remains free to organize itself in its own way and in accord with its distinctive ecclesiology, to follow its own liturgical and devotional practices, and to exclude itself from any statements and programs which it cannot in conscience accept.

It should be noted that a consistent terminology is not employed all over the world. The term “Councils of Churches” implies that only “Churches” can properly be members of the Council. This definition excludes other Christian organizations such as YMCA, YWCA, Bible Societies, and missionary societies which, since they are not “Churches”, cannot be members. For this reason, many associations today prefer to call themselves by the more inclusive term “Christian Councils” or “Christian Federations”, and their by-laws permit the full membership of Christian associations that are not, properly speaking, “Churches”. Other Councils of Churches are just that -- bodies whose members are Churches, but in which other Christian organizations often can have associate membership or observer status.

Usually the large international associations prefer to go by the name of Conferences, such as the Christian Conference of Asia or the All-Africa Conference of Churches. They usually include as members not only Churches but also Councils of Churches and other Christian organizations. Some countries, e.g. Malaysia, have overlapping associations, such as the Malaysian Council of Churches, of which the Catholic Church is not a member, and the broader Christian Federation of Malaysia, which includes both the Catholic Church and many Evangelical Churches.

Councils of Churches are not a “united Church” (such as the Church of South India or the Church of North India) which is the result of a

union of previously separated Churches. Nor is a Council of Churches a "Superchurch" which can speak in the name of member Churches or override their decisions. The Councils of Churches exist to serve the member Churches, and through them the world, not to govern or dominate the member Churches.

A final word of introduction should attempt to clear up an understandable confusion caused in English by the use of the term "Council". Modern Councils of Churches must be distinguished from the historical "Ecumenical Councils" and local and regional Councils which have been held throughout Christian history. The Ecumenical Councils, (seven of which are mutually accepted by the Churches of the East and West, a further fourteen of which are considered by the Roman Catholic Church to have ecumenical authority), and various regional Councils, are authoritative bodies within Churches which understand themselves to be one in matters of doctrine and practice. These Councils are considered by members of their Churches to have a mandate to deliberate on questions of faith and practice and to make binding decisions on matters of doctrine, cult and Church discipline.

The modern Councils of Churches do not have this "authoritative" character nor a mandate to take decisions binding on their members. Rather, they are understood as spaces created by the Churches themselves for common theological reflection, for consultation and the sharing of insights and experience, and for fostering cooperation on joint planning and projects among Churches which nevertheless remain divided among themselves. The ambiguity of the term "Council" is peculiar to the English language. In French, for example, an Ecumenical Council is referred to by the term *concile*, and a modern Council of Churches by *conseil*. In German, the first is *Konzil*, and the second *Rat*.

2. Historical Development of National Councils of Churches

The growth of the number of modern Councils of Churches reflects and has accompanied the growth of the Ecumenical Movement. As the Christian Churches variously became conscientized to the scandal of disunity and committed themselves to work for Christian unity, they were led to seek ways to associate themselves with other Churches. In this way, the growth of Councils of Churches came about as a natural response to heightened ecumenical awareness.

The earliest proponents of Church Councils as an instrument to promote Christian unity were the Churches that stemmed from the Protestant Reformation. In 1905, the Protestant Federation of France was formed as the first modern Council of Churches. As a small minority among the Christians of France, Protestants became convinced of the need to work together to preserve religious freedom, to communicate regularly and "to uphold the rights of the Churches of the federation."¹ In the same year, a Council with similar goals was formed in Puerto Rico.

Shortly thereafter, in 1908, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was created in the U.S.A. Unlike in France and Puerto Rico, the Protestant Churches in U.S.A. were not an imperiled minority seeking to defend their right to exist and practice their faith. In the United States, Protestants formed the dominant minority and could thus concern themselves with a broad program of promoting "the spiritual life and religious activities of the Churches" and of recommending a joint action on "matters of common interest". By 1910, membership in the Council included 31 denominations which represented a majority of American Protestants. In 1950, this association was succeeded by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., which replaced the Federal Council and seven other national associations.

While the earliest Councils of Churches consisted exclusively of Protestant Churches, in 1920 the Ecumenical Patriarch laid the theological groundwork for future Orthodox participation. In a famous encyclical letter sent to all Christian Churches, the Patriarch of Constantinople called upon leaders of the Churches to work towards better understanding and cooperation. Taking as a model the newly-formed League of Nations, the Patriarch proposed the creation of a League of the Churches (*koinonia ton ekklesion*)². This encyclical marked the beginning of an institutional commitment on the part of the Orthodox Churches to work for unity among Christians through involvement in ecumenical association and was influential in leading

1. "Councils of Churches: Local, National, Regional," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1991.
2. Ecumenical Patriarchate, "Three Orthodox contributions to the Common Understanding and Vision Process," *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare*, Geneva: WCC, 1998.

the Orthodox Churches to play an active role in the deliberations which led to the creation in 1948 of the World Council of Churches³. Even before the founding of the WCC, four Orthodox Churches in the U.S.A. had become members of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ.

Many of the National Councils of Churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America grew out of the desire to strengthen the identity and independence of missionary-based Churches. A fundamental goal of the Councils in these areas was to coordinate the cooperation between mission agencies and the newly-formed local Churches. After 1921, the International Missionary Council played an important role in the formation of National Councils of Churches in these areas.

For example, in India, the National Missionary Council became in 1922 the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon. The by-laws stipulated that at least half of the church representatives in the Council be nationals. In the same year, a previously existing federation of churches in Japan led to the formation of the National Christian Council. In Indonesia, a "missions consulate" created in 1906 to deal with issues affecting relations with the government of the Netherlands Indies, became the forerunner of the Indonesian National Council of Churches, which dates from 1950.

Christian Youth movements were an important catalyst for the formation of Councils of Churches, particularly in Asia. Young Christians involved in common projects of Christian witness and service which crossed denominational lines were led by their experience to work for the formation of ecumenical associations. At regional encounters of the World Student Christian Federation between 1907-1921, delegates called for associations to further ecumenical cooperation. At the 1922 meeting of the World Student Christian Federation in Beijing, the young Christians formally proposed the formation of an international Christian conference "in the Far East" to promote cooperation and mutual understanding among the Churches.

In response, the International Missionary Council proposed an East Asian committee, but the Asian Christians opted for a more independent conference in which "representatives of the church can share their experience and concern, join in meditation and prayer and make

3. "The Ecumenical Patriarchate: A brief note on its history and its role in the world today," in *Historical Notes on the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople*, www.patriarchate.org/.

common plans for participating more fully in the life of the ecumenical church". This conference became a reality in 1948 and held its first assembly in Bangkok in 1949. The conference eventually led, a decade later, to the formation in 1959 of the East Asia Christian Conference, which held its first assembly in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 1973, the name was changed to the more geographically inclusive "Christian Conference of Asia" (CCA). The CCA has continually reviewed its composition over the years in an effort to shape a conference that could respond better to its ecumenical goals. The original 1959 constitution was revised in 1964, 1971, 1973 and, most recently, in 1995.⁴

The CCA now includes more than 120 member Churches and Councils from South, East, and Southeast Asia, together with Australia and New Zealand. It is worth noting that some Roman Catholics already participate in the CCA through the membership of the Catholic Church in the National Councils in Taiwan and Australia. Roman Catholic delegates from Australia took active part in the recent CCA General Assembly held in Tomohon, Indonesia, in June, 2000. The scope of CCA concerns has expanded to include a common witness of Christian faith on social issues such as religious freedom, human rights, the status of women, interreligious dialogue, and theological reflection on cultural and economic globalization.

The history of regional and continental Councils is similar in other parts of the world. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), created in 1963, has focused on issues of worship and evangelism, the defence of Christian family life in the African context, and indigenization of the Gospel. The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) dates from 1966 and has emphasized themes of education, citizenship, and the relation of gospel to culture. The Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC) was founded in 1973 and has focused upon "God's action in Christ" in terms of Caribbean culture, experience and needs and on the search for unity and renewal among the churches. The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) was founded in 1982 and emphasizes cooperation among Protestant missions and indigenous churches, with a strong accent on building a social and

4. Christian Conference of Asia, *Directory 1996*, Hong Kong: 1996, P.5. The amended constitution is published in *The Constitution of the Christian Conference of Asia*, Hong Kong, 1995.

political system based on justice and brotherhood. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), founded in 1974 has promoted understanding and cooperation among member churches and gives special importance to interreligious relations, particularly to relations with Muslims, who form a large majority in the region. The Conference of European Churches (CEC), founded in 1959, was very active in building and maintaining close contacts between the Churches of Eastern and Western Europe in the years when Europe was politically divided by the "Cold War", and today is seeking to witness to faith in "post-Christian" cultures and in the increasingly pluralist European societies. It is to be noted that in several of these regional Conferences, the Catholic Church is fully represented, such as in the Pacific Council of Churches, the Caribbean Conference of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches.

In summary, the 20th Century saw a steady increase in the number of Councils of Churches around the world, from the first two in 1905, to 23 in 1928, and 30 by 1948, when the World Council of Churches was formed. At that time, 9 Councils of Churches were located in Asia, 3 in Africa and the Near East, and 5 in Latin America. Today, in the year 2000, there are 103 National Councils of Churches, as well as regional international conferences and numerous local Councils.

3. Catholic Participation in National Councils of Churches

The Roman Catholic Church came late to the ecumenical movement. This is partially due to an attitude that ecumenism would constitute a compromise with error, partly because Catholics in the early part of the 20th Century were hoping that other Churches would "return" to the "fullness" of Christian faith which was to be found in the Roman Catholic tradition. The turning point came with the 1964 Second Vatican Council "Decree on Ecumenism", often referred to by its Latin title, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Although the Decree on Ecumenism did not refer explicitly to Councils of Churches, the document laid the theological foundations for Catholic participation in such Councils by recognizing the ecclesial character of other Churches, repeatedly referring to them as "Churches and ecclesial communities". Moreover, the "decree on Ecumenism" shifts the focus on Christian unity for Catholics from a concern for a return to Rome as the center of the Church to "Christ as the source and center of ecclesiastical communion" (*UR*, 20)⁵.

5. Second Vatican Council, "Decree on Ecumenism," *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II*, Dublin: 1995, p. 519.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church was not a member of any National Council of Churches. However, only 7 years after the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated in 1971, the Catholic Church had joined the National Council of Churches in 11 countries⁶. The number increased to 19 by 1975⁷, to 33 by 1986, to 41 by 1993, to 58 in 2000 (70, if one includes the Catholic Church in nations of the Middle East Council of Churches).

The first explicit treatment by the Holy See of Roman Catholic participation in National and Regional Councils of Churches came in 1975 in a document issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity entitled: *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National, and Local Levels*⁸, by which time the Catholic Church had already joined the NCC in 19 countries. This document is important for two reasons: 1) it elaborated the principles on which Catholic participation in Councils of Churches is based, and 2) it formed the basis of the position taken in the 1993 *Guidelines*, which often simply restates the 1975 document. For these reasons, it might be worth examining the document in greater detail.

Chapter 5 of the document, entitled "Considerations concerning Council Membership", takes up the theological motivations for joining in ecumenical association with other Christian Churches, as well as the practical difficulties to be kept in mind. The document holds that "since the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the *ecclesial* character of other Christian communities, the Church has frequently called upon Catholics to cooperate not only with other Christians as *individuals*, but also with other Churches and ecclesial communities *as such*" (EC, 5a). This association with other Churches as *Churches* should not be seen as a purely pragmatic cooperation on matters of social and human concern, but should go beyond that to the more

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- 6. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service, "Consultation on Christian Councils, Geneva, June 28," July 7, 1971: 15/19-20.
 - 7. P. C. for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service, "Councils of Churches with Catholic Membership." January 1976: 31/13-15.
 - 8. P. C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels* (Vatican City, 1975). Unlike most Vatican documents, this one (henceforth, EC) is not published with consecutively numbered paragraphs, but in outline form, with chapters in Roman numerals, followed by subsections a) b) c), subdivided again into headings i) ii) iii).
 - 9. The italics are in the original text.

essential form of cooperation in the area of a common Christian witness of faith.

Membership in a Council of Churches implies "recognition of the Council of Churches as an instrument, among others, both for expressing the unity already existing among the Churches and also of advancing towards a greater unity and a more effective Christian witness" (5b). Catholics, like other Christians, must not see their participation in Councils of Churches as the final goal of ecumenical activity, as though full Christian unity were to be achieved simply by joining a Council of Churches. The document, rather, envisions the Councils as instrument, but not the unique instrument, which the Churches should employ in their search for unity. This is not to diminish the value of belonging to Councils of Churches, but rather to underline their importance in the task of seeking the fullness of unity which Christ desired among his disciples. As the document later concludes: "Among the many forms of ecumenical cooperation, Councils of Churches and Christian Councils are not the only form, but they are certainly one of the more important" (EC, 6g). They play "an important role in ecumenical relations" and hence are to be taken seriously by all the Churches.

The document seeks to relieve some of the theological disquiet which some Catholics might have about joining a Council of Churches. Joining a Council in which the Catholic Church would find itself on equal footing with other bodies does "not diminish its faith about its uniqueness" (EC, 5b). The document cites the well-known statement of the Second Vatican Council that the unique Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church (LG, 8), and this uniqueness is not compromised by the Church taking part, on equal footing with other Churches, in a Council at the national or regional level.

The document on *Ecumenical Collaboration* underlines that Councils of Churches are not themselves Churches nor do they have the responsibility of Churches to engage in conversations leading to full unity. The scope of the Councils of Churches is mainly in the practical realm, rather than in the dogmatic. In saying this, the Holy See does not forbid Councils of Churches to study together questions of "Faith and Order", and the document later notes that "it is normal that Councils should want to discuss and reflect upon the doctrinal bases of the practical projects they undertake" (EC, 6h). Such

discussions, it states, have “a deep importance in stimulating member Churches to a deeper understanding of the demands of unity willed by Christ and to facing deadlocks in a new way” (*EC*. 5c).

Nevertheless, it “is not the task of a Council to take the initiative in promoting formal doctrinal conversations between Churches. These belong to the immediate and bilateral contacts between the Churches.” Thus, in joining a Council of Churches, Catholics need not fear that they will be expected to be drawn into technical dogmatic discussions which they may feel they are not well prepared.

The domain of Councils of Churches is properly speaking that of practical collaboration, giving particular attention to social problems such as housing, health, relief etc. (*EC*, 5e, ii). At times, the Councils will feel called to make public statements on matters of common concern in areas of social justice, human development, public welfare, and personal or social morality. These may vary from broad statements of position to specific stands on concrete questions. They might examine a subject and point out its social and ethical ramifications, and they will often identify various approaches to treat problems. Even though such statements reflect the theological positions of the Churches, they are not to be “considered as official utterances” (*EC*, 5d,i) made in the name of the Churches.

In fact, as the document notes, the problematic nature of issuing joint statements is one that the member Churches of a Council must constantly keep in mind. It has given rise to much debate, tension, and hard feelings in a number of Councils and on rare occasions has led one or another member Church to withdraw from the Council. This does not mean that Councils should never make public statements, but that they should realize that full consensus is very difficult to achieve and that sincere respect must be granted to minority views (*EC*, 5d,iii). All this is to say in a Council of Churches that the integrity of each member Church must be constantly considered, their individual positions honored, and polarization avoided.

The document points out that joining a Council of Churches is a serious undertaking, and Catholic bishops, if they decide to join an NCC should not settle for a superficial participation but should fully involve their local Church. It is not enough simply to send delegates, but Council participation should be integrated into the pastoral life and planning of the Catholic dioceses. For example, when the Catholic

Church joins a Council, this must be accompanied by "constant ecumenical education of Catholics concerning the implications of such participation" (*EC*, 51).

In its "Pastoral and Practical Reflections for Local Ecumenical Action" in Chapter 6, the Document makes two further important points. Firstly, each Council of Churches is unique and must be designed according to the needs in each nation. Churches should not simply adopt models which were found to be successful elsewhere (*EC*, 6a) but they should, after reflecting together on the needs and challenges of the Churches in their region, create their own unique ecumenical response. The Holy See thus envisions a great deal of freedom for the Churches in each region to form a Council which would accurately reflect the actual ecumenical relationships "on the ground" and would enable the Churches to express their unity in realistic service to society.

Secondly, as valuable as Councils of Churches are as instruments to express the unity which exists among Christians and to work toward fuller and deeper unity, the creation of new structures can never replace "the collaboration of Christians in prayer, reflection and action, based on common baptism and on a faith which on many essential points is also common" (*EC*, 6c). In other words, if the search for Christian unity is solely focused on structures, procedures, and bureaucracy, but omits the essential *communion* that comes from Christians' praying together, reflecting on the Word of God in Scripture together, thinking through social problems together, and actually working together in various aspects of the Churches' life, the unity which Councils seek to achieve will be minimal and the renewal which Councils of Churches can bring to the whole Christian community will not be very profound.

The aforementioned 1975 document on *Ecumenical Collaboration* was the first official instruction given by the Holy See on the question of Roman Catholic membership in National and Regional Councils of Churches. It noted with satisfaction that the Catholic Church in many countries had decided to join NCCs or to create new ecumenical associations in which the Catholic Church would take part. It pointed out possible problems that could arise and how many of the divisive issues could be foreseen and crises avoided. The document mostly seems to want to reassure Catholics throughout the world that joining a Council of Churches can be an important step towards working for Christian unity, expressing the unity which already exists due to our

common Baptism, and renewing the Churches in their commitment to serve God in Christ and in doing so be of service to a world reconciled to God.

Because of the increasing numbers of countries and regions where the Catholic Church had joined and was participating in Councils of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches, within the framework of the Joint Working Group, met three times - in 1971, 1986, and 1993 - to reflect on issues connected with Roman Catholic participation in NCCs.

In a message to the 1993 consultation, held in Hong Kong, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stressed a key aspect of the function of National Councils of Churches in the ecumenical search for unity. "National Councils of Churches", he stated, "as servants of unity play an important role in providing opportunities for strengthening the spirit of mutual understanding among member Churches."¹⁰ Here the Cardinal is emphasizing the human dimension, the value of Councils for a personal growth in commitment to Christian unity. In the NCCs, Christians of various Churches can come to know one another personally, to discover a shared Christian commitment through common action, to enrich one another by the distinctive elements of Christian life which their particular traditions have preserved and emphasized, and to rediscover concretely their common faith in God by praying together in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the same year as the Hong Kong consultation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued its definitive guidelines for Christian Ecumenism, entitled the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*. The 1993 Guidelines replaced the temporary *Ecumenical Directory* which had been called for by the Second Vatican Council and subsequently published in two parts, in 1967 and 1970. The 1993 *Directory*¹¹ treats questions of Roman Catholic participation in Councils of Churches in paragraphs 166-171.

10. Edward Cardinal Cassidy, "Message to participants at the Third International Consultation on National Councils of Churches (NCCs)", Hong Kong, 10 February 1993, p. 4.

11. P. C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, Vatican City: 1993. Henceforth, DAP.

Many of the instructions contained in the 1993 *Directory* repeat and amplify those already given in the 1975 document on *Ecumenical Collaboration*, but on some key points, the *Directory* goes farther than the earlier document. This is particularly the case in *welcoming*, for the first time, Catholic participation in the Councils. The *EC* document treated the phenomenon of Catholic Churches joining NCCs and RCCs as a fact of life in the ecumenical movement, as an "important instrument" in the search for Christianity. The *Directory* goes beyond this to welcome positively this phenomenon in Church life as something to be desired. The document states: "Since it is desirable for the Catholic Church to find the proper expression for various levels of its relation with other Churches and ecclesial Communities, and since Councils of Churches and Christian Councils are among the more important forms of ecumenical cooperation, the growing contacts which the Catholic Church is having with Councils in many parts of the world are to be welcomed" (*DAP*, 167).

For the first time, the *Directory* clearly distinguishes (*DAP*, 166) between a "Council of Churches" (composed of Churches and responsible to the member Churches) and a "Christian Council" (composed of Churches as well as other Christian groups and organizations, such as Bible Societies or YMCAs.) This distinction reflects the general tendency in the years since the 1975 document to form more inclusive Christian Councils whose members would be not only Churches but also other forms of Christian association. This development reflects the recognition that in the effort to build Christian unity, other Christian groups and organizations often play a leading role and should not be excluded from membership in the Councils whose aim is to promote that unity.

The *Directory* does not recommend one form of association over the other, but wisely leaves that decision to the authorities of the local Church. These authorities, states the *Directory*, "will generally be the Synod of Eastern Catholic Churches or the Episcopal Conference (except where there is only one diocese in a nation)" (*DAP*, 168). In preparing to take this decision, the Eastern Synods or Episcopal Conferences "should be *in touch with*¹² the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity". The careful phraseology of the *Directory* underlines that the authority for joining Councils rests with the local

12. Italics mine.

bishops through their Synod or Episcopal Conference while, as in all matters affecting the universal Church, the local Churches should always communicate and consult with the Pontifical Council. What is involved is not a matter of “asking permission from Rome” but of acting in communion with the worldwide Catholic Church.

The *Directory* notes the considerations which must accompany the decision to take part in a Council of Churches or Christian Council. An important consideration is the *pastoral advisability* of joining a Council, which means that local and national socio-political realities must be taken into consideration. Participation in the life of the Council must be compatible with the teaching of the Catholic Church and must not blur Catholic self-understanding as to its uniqueness and specific identity (*DAP*, 169). In other words, there must be doctrinal clarity, especially in the area of ecclesiology, and ecumenical education provided for Church members. The Catholic Church should not impose its own ecclesiology on other member Churches, but respect their proper ecclesiological self-understanding. At the same time, the Catholic Church expects that its own theology of the nature of the Church will be understood and respected by its partners.

The *Directory* repeats the view of the 1975 document that Councils of Churches and Christian Councils do not contain within or among themselves the beginning of a new Church which could replace the communion that now exists in the Catholic Church. They must not proclaim themselves Churches “nor claim an authority which would permit them to confer a ministry of Word or Sacrament”. In fact, the concern that the Councils of Churches not be regarded as a new superchurch has been a constant preoccupation of member Churches since the first Councils of Churches appeared almost a century ago. The formation of Councils among Churches still divided from one another is but one instrument aimed at Christian unity, and it must be clearly distinguished from the praiseworthy effort to achieve structural and sacramental unity in the creation of united Churches.

The *Directory* notes the kind of considerations of which account must be taken before the Catholic Church should take a decision to join existing NCCs or take part in the creation of new associations. Examples of such considerations are the system of representation, voting rights, decision-making processes, manner of making public statements, and the degree of authority attributed to common statements (*DAP*, 169).

Finally, the *Directory* repeats the counsel given in the 1975 document, that joining a Council is a serious responsibility which should not be taken lightly. It implies that responsibilities are not fulfilled simply by becoming members in name. "The Catholic Church should be represented by well-qualified and committed persons" who are sincerely convinced of the importance of actively pursuing Christian unity and who are clearly aware of the limits to which they can commit the Church without referring to the authorities who appointed them. The *Directory* stresses that the counsels given are not meant to discourage local Churches from joining Councils, but rather to ensure that membership in such Councils will be able to make a "more important and efficacious contribution to the ecumenical movement" (*DAP*, 171).

The continually increasing acceptance and encouragement by the Holy See for Catholic participation in Councils of Churches since the time of the Second Vatican Council can only be explained as the result of a positive experience in observing the fruits of such ecumenical involvement. Most recently, in the 1995 document on ecumenical formation of Christians entitled *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity lists information about Councils of Churches as one of the "important pastoral and practical matters which should not be omitted from ecumenical formation, especially that of seminarians."¹³

All this preparation set the groundwork for the discussion among Asian bishops at the 1998 Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops (popularly known as "the Asian Synod") in which the bishops overwhelmingly voted in favour of a *postulatum* to the Holy Father to encourage, in his post-Synodal exhortation, the episcopal conferences in Asia to enter into a process of consultation with leaders of other Churches to explore new forms of ecumenical association. This recommendation was reflected a year later in the above-mentioned Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, which the Holy Father promulgated in New Delhi, India, on 6 November 1999.¹⁴

13. P. C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, Vatican: 1995, par. 29.

14. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 30.

Acting upon the Pope's recommendation in *Ecclesia in Asia*, the bishops representing the Episcopal Conference members of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, at their Sixth Plenary Assembly held in Sampran, Thailand in January, 2000, approved the proposal to hold an Asia-wide consultation on questions related to the participation of Bishops' Conferences in Asia in Councils of Churches and other forms of ecumenical association with other Christian Churches.

This consultation, called AMCU III (the third consultation of the Asian Movement for Christian Unity), to be held in January, 2001, is being jointly organized with the Christian Conference of Asia. The consultation will bring together representatives from each Episcopal Conference which is a member of FABC together with representatives of CCA member Churches and leaders of NCCs in Asia.

The matters for discussion are many. There exists in the world a wide variety of ecumenical associations. Each has its own by-laws and its own criteria for membership. There are, as noted above, Councils of Churches with membership limited strictly to "Churches", as well as the broader-based "Christian Councils". In some countries, the Catholic Church has simply joined the existing National Council of Churches, as was done in Taiwan. Elsewhere, the Catholic Church has deliberated with other Churches to create an entirely new association that would accurately reflect ecumenical relations at this time. This is the experience of the Churches in Australia, as is described in David Gill's article in this issue of *Jeevadhara*¹⁵. In yet other countries, the Catholic Church, while not joining the National Council of Churches, has entered into full membership in a more inclusive association, as was done in Malaysia by Catholic Church participation in the Christian Federation of Malaysia.

A serious matter for discussion concerns the spiritual values to be gained by joining a Council of Churches or creating a new ecumenical association. How can individual Churches benefit by their association with other Churches? What are the specific benefits to be gained by coming to know better other Churches as *Churches*, by praying together regularly, by addressing together the social problems of their countries, by taking common stands and making common statements

15. Cf. David Gill, "New Ecumenical Structures: an Australian Experiment", *Jeevadhara*, July, 2000, pp. 368 - 375

on ethical issues, and by facing the mutual challenges that the Churches will inevitably pose to each other through an ongoing association? What insights can be gained by the Churches in Asia from the experiences, both positive and negative, of other parts of the world where the Catholic Church has joined Councils of Churches?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have purposely not addressed questions regarding the mission of Councils of Churches, their theological and spiritual bases, or the sociological factors that underlie the formation of Councils or the decision to join them. These aspects of the question are being competently handled in other articles of this same issue of *Jeevadharma*. I have tried to limit myself to presenting a history of Catholic participation in these Councils.

However, I hope that my personal conviction of the value of participation in Councils of Churches to pursue the Spirit-driven goal of Christian unity has become clear in this presentation. Councils of Churches are not the goal or the last word in the ecumenical search for the full unity among His disciples for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper. They are merely a tool, an instrument, but an important and effective one for following the Spirit's guidance toward full unity. The well-known Canadian theologian, Fr. Tillard sums up this grace-filled instrumentality of Councils of Churches in an article based on a talk he gave in Hong Kong in 1993:

"A Council of Churches makes a "loving dialogue" possible. By breaking the isolation and bringing about knowledge of each other, ecumenical encounter slowly erodes distrust, prejudices and traditional hatreds. While each Church doubtless begins by hoping to impose its own views and confessional ambitions on the others, we find that among the members something gradually comes into being which triumphs over the interests and claims of each group. It is in learning to love one another, in the knowledge that diversities exist and in respect for them, that we gradually learn the unity that God wants."¹⁶

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New Ecumenical Structures: an Australian Experiment

David Gill

The Revd David Gill, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and a minister of the Uniting Church there, in this article narrates the evolution of the ecumenical movement in Australia from its beginning in 1946 to the present day. In spite of the common acceptance of the working principles he rightly laments the rampant denominationism among the member-churches of the NCCA whenever a united Christian witness is called for.

The ecumenical movement, thank God, is far greater than the structures which from time to time are created to serve it.

That does not mean structures are unimportant. A Council of Churches functioning well can do much to further the quest for Christian unity. Functioning badly, it may slow or even obstruct the quest. So structures do matter.

That was why Australia's churches, in 1988, took a step whose consequences were to prove far reaching for ecumenical relationships.

What was the Australian Council of Churches (ACC) had been formed in 1946, with Protestant, Anglican and later Orthodox membership. The Roman Catholic Church, the country's largest, was not a member nor were several significant Protestant churches. Moreover, some churches that did belong to the ACC suspected the organisation was due for review. The ecumenical movement had come a long way in those years, they reasoned, and it was appropriate to ask whether machinery created four decades earlier was exactly what the movement now needed.

So the ACC's member churches extended an invitation to several churches that were not part of the existing structure. Would you be

willing to sit with us, pray with us, think with us, dream with us, they asked, to see whether, together, we could find our way towards a structure that might more adequately express and more effectively serve the ecumenical movement as it is in Australia today? Nothing would be non-negotiable, they said. Everything would be on the table. The process would be open-ended.

The primary question, please note, was not how we could draw in the Catholic or any other church. It was how we could develop a way of being together that is more adequate to the ecumenical task today.

The Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches responded positively. A planning group went to work, tried out its ideas on prospective member churches, worked some more, and finally proposed that the ACC make way for a National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) with a rewritten constitution, revamped programme emphases, new decision-making processes and, above all, a significantly changed self-understanding. In July 1994 the transition took place, and Australia found itself with a national ecumenical body that now comprises fourteen member churches: half of them Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, the largest the Roman Catholic Church, and Protestants a minority.

Some Working Principles

Several important convictions had emerged in the course of this rethink.

First, it was acknowledged that, humanly speaking, the primary actors in the ecumenical movement are the churches. Ecumenical instruments can help. Enthusiastic individuals are indispensable. But we must never lose sight of the fact that it is first and foremost a movement of the churches. Once that is taken seriously there are important implications for any council's ethos, priorities, leadership and decision-making style.

Second, ecumenical structures must be seen to be interim, provisional, flexible and responsive to the churches that comprise them. They are instruments created to help achieve certain goals, not ends in themselves; temporary devices to meet a current need, not permanent features of the ecclesiastical landscape.

The principle, of course, is easy enough to affirm. In reality, however, ecumenical structures are institutions, like the churches which comprise them. Like those churches, councils too develop rules, norms,

assumptions, programmes, styles of work and constraints which must sometimes be broken open for the sake of ecumenical advance.

The transition in Australia, for example, was not without its doubts and hesitations. Was the old ACC risking too much by putting everything on the table for re-negotiation? Would there be this commission, that staff post, this budget line in the new body? Could we really trust each other? Would ecumenism survive without a structure that had been in place for so long? Lurking beneath those anxieties was another, deeper question: did we really believe what we said about ecumenical structures being provisional, destined to die for the sake of the movement they seek to advance?

Third, a council of churches has to respect the differing convictions of the churches, not least in the way it spells out the ecclesiological implications of council membership. At one stage, the planners toyed with a proposal to build NCCA membership on the basis of our common baptism. Two considerations soon scuppered that. The Salvation Army and the Religious Society of Friends pointed out that approach would exclude them, and the other churches were reluctant to fracture the fellowship in that way. It also became apparent that significant differences about baptism still remained among at least some of the other churches.

What developed, instead, was an understanding of the implications of membership that was very much in step with the WCC's Toronto statement on "The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches" (1950). As the NCCA's constitution puts it--

While some member churches may not be able to recognise each other as churches in the full and true sense, they nevertheless acknowledge in each other important elements of both doctrine and practice that belong to the Church which Christ founded. It is hoped that through further dialogue the member churches will broaden their knowledge of each other, extend their recognition of each other, find ways of giving greater expression to what they hold in common, and move towards a more visible expression of the unity Christ has given to his Church.

Fourth, membership implies commitment by the member churches - to the council, yes, but more importantly to one another through the council. That commitment is not a one-off, fulfilled on being received

into membership, but continuing. The NCCA's basis uses the imagery of pilgrimage to express this:

The NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those churches and Christian communities which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and commit themselves

- (i) to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his Church, and
- (ii) to work together towards the fulfilment of their mission of common witness, proclamation and service, to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A prayer devised for use in local congregations of member churches picks up the same motif of movement:

God of life, unity and peace,
you have called us to be your people.
Bring us to closer unity with you
within the household of your Church.

Direct our steps as we journey
in the National Council of Churches
in Australia, that we may become
what you have called us to be;
And that together we may walk in
newness of life: new and old, east and west,
indigenous and all who have gathered in
this land from the corners of the earth.

We ask this in the name of Jesus
and through the grace and
communion of the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, the decision-makers in ecumenical bodies have to be genuinely and authoritatively representatives of the churches that comprise them. The churches' recognised leaders must be involved, and with them a representative cross-section of their people. It is for the churches, not ecumenical bureaucrats or lobby groups of one kind or another, to decide who should speak for them on which policy-making committees.

Sixth, councils must focus on fostering trust and deepening mutual understanding. Building relationships takes priority over running programmes. Churches need to feel confident that their strongly held convictions will not be ignored or overridden by others, particularly when views are being proclaimed publicly. The reconciled koinonia for which we yearn is not just an end goal; It is a way of being together that should find expression even now in the way churches handle their disagreements and make their decisions within ecumenical structures.

Seventh, ecumenism does not start and stop at the national frontier. National councils of churches need partnerships with one another, with their regional ecumenical organisations, with the World Council of Churches.

Learning on the Run

How do these convictions stand six years after the NCCA's inauguration? In a word: well, from none of them would the NCCA's member churches want to resile. Indeed, we would commend them to churches elsewhere that are reviewing their ecumenical structures. But these years have brought some significant learnings.

One of these is that churches travelling the ecumenical road together need help. The new NCCA soon found itself pondering how to encourage the movement of its would-be travellers, lest they settle down too comfortably in the way station they have reached and lose sight of their final destination. A process of what has been termed "multi-dimensional covenanting" has been initiated, in which each NCCA member church is considering what specific commitments it may be able to enter into with other particular churches. These may include undertakings by two churches to do one or more of the following: praying and caring for one another, developing common decision-making, sharing buildings, planning joint strategies for mission, engaging in common witness, sharing in common celebrations of the sacraments, sharing ordained ministries. The whole idea is to give clearer shape to the commitments churches made to each other when they established the NCCA, by helping them discover "what is possible if we go the limits of what is permissible".

The covenanting exercise is already registering new challenges for at least some member churches. All denominations, for example, have decision-making procedures shaped to deal with intra-church issues and agendas, but some have no procedure for dealing with initiatives addressed to them by other churches. Indeed, more basic issues of

ecclesiology are emerging when, for example, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference finds itself wondering whether it has any authority to make such commitments on behalf of the Catholic Church - and, if it doesn't, how is that church's participation in the journey towards unity to be given clear national expression?

Barriers to forward movement, of course, are not all doctrinal. Some of the most intractable have \$\$\$ signs attached. There is no earthly reason why overseas humanitarian aid, for example, needs to carry a denominational label. There is no specifically Protestant way of responding to natural or manmade disasters. There is no distinctively Catholic approach to coping with refugees. When people are hurt, our doctrinal differences are largely irrelevant. Concerted action by the churches, acting as one through the Council, should be easy.

But it is not, in Australia at any rate. Such things continue to be done on a denominational basis, perhaps more so than when the NCCA was formed, partly because structures, staff and money -- including access to government overseas aid funding -- are involved. Reluctant to challenge this manifestation of rampant denominationalism, the NCCA's Executive, which should have known better, contented itself with encouraging one of the Council's commissions to be more imaginative in an equivalent NCCA fund-raising activity. The result: instead of doing things ecumenically, the churches are continuing with business as usual -- but with an "ecumenical" initiative added. It is so easy, especially when difficulties loom large, for people to lose their grip on the vision of ecumenism as first and foremost a *movement of the churches*. An ecumenical instrument, at such moments, turns into an ecumenical alibi. Instead of being a means by which the churches themselves move, it becomes a façade behind which the churches avoid the need for movement.

Too many ecumenical organisations fudge this issue of the commitment implied by membership. Any church applying to join a national council of churches can reasonably be asked not only "do you accept the basis", but also "tell us about the yearning for visible unity that has motivated your application and what your church has done, and intends to do, to give expression to it". The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer accused his church, during the Hitler days, of offering people "cheap grace". Some NCCs, failing to press applicant churches in this way, end up promulgating "cheap ecumenism", and this at the end of the day does no service either to the churches or to the ecumenical movement.

Churches that genuinely yearn for visible unity will want to do their best to foreshadow that goal in the way they deal with one another in ecumenical decision-making. The NCCA's early years have underlined the importance of developing relationships of mutual understanding and respect, reciprocal sensitivity and forbearance.

In an article in a recent issue of the *Ecumenical Review*, I recall, the Indian theologian M.M. Thomas, when Moderator of the WCC's Central Committee, liked to remark that, humanly speaking, the ecumenical movement comprises a few thousand people around the world who have become friends and learned to trust each other. He was right, but such friendship and trust require conscious cultivation. They are not always evident in the way councils of churches operate, and when they are lacking something vital has gone amiss.

Churches frequently find themselves tinkering with their ecumenical structures. But intangibles matter more than machinery.

Take the NCCA's decision-making style. The Council has a constitution, but no rules of debate. It makes decisions, but tries to avoid voting. Serious issues are addressed, but with humour and informality. Tutored by Quaker ways of discerning the mind of the meeting, encouraged by Orthodox who were never comfortable with Westminster-style procedures anyway, the NCCA increasingly has found itself operating by consensus rather than majority vote, by relationship building rather than procedural finesse.

At the 1998 meeting of the NCCA's top governing body, for example, a decision was made to open conversations with people of other faiths. We were already into the next item on the agenda when two Orthodox expressed disquiet at the decision. They were a minority. Procedurally they were out of order. But the meeting stopped in its tracks, reversed, heard their concern, suspended the decision it had just taken and arranged to think further with a view to arriving at what would truly be a common mind. Responsiveness to one another mattered more than getting through the agenda.

Such an ethos has practical consequences. First, people relax if they know they will be listened to and their churches' sensitivities will be respected. Second, mechanical questions like how many delegates a church should have no longer matter so much, once you lose interest in counting votes. Third, in such an atmosphere the heads of churches come into their own as a sort of informal ecumenical episcopé. Their influence crosses denominational lines -- so when the Cardinal speaks,

Catholic heads are not the only ones that swivel expecting words of wisdom. What seems to be emerging is a shared ministry of leadership exercised collegially in the context of inclusive gatherings of representatives of the wider people of God.

Worth the Effort?

So -- would we do it all again? Undoubtedly, yes. Not because this exercise has produced an ecumenical paradise in Australia -- it hasn't. Not because the more comprehensive ecumenical structure always works like clockwork -- it doesn't. But because there is a real sense, shared by all participants in the journey, that where we are stumbling to follow, the Spirit of God most certainly goes before.

Let the final word be from Cardinal Edward Clancy, who last month concluded his term as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Cautious by nature, initially wary when he found himself propelled into the life of a strange new ecumenical structure, he wrote to me reflecting on his six years of close involvement with the Council:

"I found my time on the National Council of Churches challenging, and sometimes frustrating, but always stimulating and rewarding. I made many good friends. The more I got to know the other members, the more I came to appreciate and admire them. Especially did I appreciate their faith, their commitment, their sincerity and their openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I experienced an authentic ecumenical outlook at all times. However passionate the views held, there was never any sign of small-mindedness, and there was always present that essential ecumenical ingredient, a sense of humour. The unity that God wills for us may still be a long way off, but I am quite sure that the Spirit is moving in the Council and that we are on the right track."

On that track, the NCCA would welcome the companionship of many more fellow pilgrims

National Council of Churches in India an Introduction

Packiam Thumbaraj Samuel

Asian Churches are called to explore the possibilities of creating new ecumenical structures for collaboration and common witness. Review of the existing structures and organizations has to be the first step. National Council of Churches in India is an important ecumenical structure which has been functioning for many years. We asked the NCCI to introduce itself mainly for our Catholic readers who are not familiar with the NCCI. This write-up on the NCCI is prepared by Mr. Packiam Thumbaraj Samuel, Executive Secretary of Unit I (Unity, Fellowship and Dialogue) of the NCCI. Editor

National Council of Churches in India is the Ecumenical Forum of India. The Council was established in 1914 as the National Missionary Council of India and affiliated to the International Missionary Council. In course of time it became an organisation of wider ecumenical importance as other All-India Christian Agencies came into its fellowship. In 1923 the Council constituted itself as the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon. Later the Councils of Burma and Sri Lanka separated from it.

In 1979 this Council transformed itself into the National Council of Churches in India. It is an inter-confessional autonomous Council and an ecumenical expression of churches in India which embraces, promotes and co-ordinates the various forms of the Churches' ministry, and serves also the wider community and society. It is the common platform for thought and action and as such it brings together the churches and other Christian organizations for mutual consultation, assistance and action in all matters related to the life and witness of the churches and Christians in India.

Primary Objectives

1. Providing fellowship and a common forum for dialogue and for fostering common concerns among the Churches in India.
2. Promoting Church unity as a basic requirement for the life and work of the Church in India and as an essential step for restoring the wholeness of the human community.
3. Interpreting and communicating the Mission of the Church, relating it to every aspect of life.
4. Engaging in and enhancing education, social welfare, relief and health service by the churches.
5. Representing the churches before the public, the Government and other national and international agencies.
6. Initiating and promoting action in the area of socio-political needs of the poor including those of the Christian community in India.
7. To consult and co-ordinate with the World Council of Churches and other inter-national and national ecumenical organizations.

Member Churches

1. Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church
2. Arcot Lutheran Church
3. Bengal-Orissa-Bihar Baptist Convention
4. Chaldean Syrian Church of the East
5. Church of North India
6. Church of South India
7. Convention of Baptist Churches of the Northern Circars
8. Council of Baptist Churches in North East India
9. Council of Baptist Churches of Northern India
10. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Madhya Pradesh
11. Good Samaritan Evangelical Lutheran Church
12. Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur
13. Hindustani Covenant Church
14. India Evangelical Lutheran Church
15. Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church
16. Malabar Independent Syrian Church
17. Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church
18. Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
19. Mar Thoma Syrian Church
20. Mennonite Brethren Church
21. Mennonite Church in India
22. Methodist Church in India

23. Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church
24. Presbyterian Church of India
25. Salvation Army
26. Samavesam of Telugu Baptist Churches
27. South Andhra Lutheran Church
28. Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church
29. The National Organisation of the New Apostolic Church

Regional Christian Councils

1. Andhra Pradesh Council of Churches
2. Bengal Christian Council
3. Bihar Council of Churches
4. Gujarat Council of Churches
5. Karnataka Christian Council
6. Kerala Council of Churches
7. Madhya Pradesh Christian Council
8. Maharashtra Council of Churches
9. North East India Christian Council
10. North West India Christian Council
11. Santalia Council of Churches
12. Tamilnad Christian Council
13. Utkal Christian Council
14. Uttar Pradesh Council of Churches

All India Christian Organisations

1. All India Council of Higher Education
2. Bible Society of India
3. Christian Association for Radio and Audio Visual Services
4. Christian Union of India
5. Ecumenical Council for Drought Action and Water Management
6. Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
7. Inter-Church Service Association
8. Leprosy Mission
9. Lott Carey Baptist Mission in India
10. National Council of YMCA's of India
11. National Missionary Society of India
12. Student Christian Movement of India
13. United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India
14. Young Women's Christian Association of India

Related Agencies

1. All India Sunday School Association
2. Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
3. Christian Literature Society

4. Christian Medical Association of India
5. Church's Auxiliary for Social Action
6. Ecumenical Church Loan Fund - India
7. Henry Martyn Institute, International Centre for Research Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation

Programme Units of NCCI

Unit I : Unity, Fellowship and Dialogue

Establishes, sustains and augments ecumenical relations at the national, Asian and global level.

- Facilitates the process of the unity of the Churches in India.
- Enables the churches to seek new expressions of unity in the context of India's diversities of culture, language, class, caste and religion.
- Encourages intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue.

Unit II : Mission and Evangelism

- Provides opportunities for dialogue and reflection on mission priorities
- Encourages joint action for social involvement
- Enables the churches to understand their prophetic ministry better in the face of contemporary challenges
- Acts as a facilitator for the Churches and Christian organizations in their development priorities.
- Initiates and promotes action to change the quality of life of the poor in India.

Unit III : National Issues

- Formulates Christian public opinion on social, political and ethico-religious issues of the day.
- Studies and interprets national issues of the churches.
- Safeguards the legitimate interests and rights of Christians as a minority community.
- Endeavours to influence policy decisions and legislation of the state.
- Acts as the voice of the church against injustice, marginalisation and oppression of minorities, dalits, children and women.

Unit IV : All India Council for Christian Women

- Coordinates the work of Church women ecumenically and plays an advocacy role for the full and creative participation of women in the life of the Church
- Voices the concerns of church women and forges links with secular women's movements.

Unit V : Youth

- Strengthens youth work and concerns within member churches and forges an ecumenical youth movement in India
- Plays an advocacy role to ensure youth perspectives in the life of the Church and strengthens links between Church youth and other youth movements.
- Networks the youth activities of the Churches and engages in empowerment of young women and men through training and capacity building for effective participation in Church and Society.

Unit VI : Communications

- Engages in print media, electronic media, and unconventional models of communication such as folk dance, street plays, indigenous music and other ways of cultural expression and inter-church and inter-organisational exchange of information and resources.
- Publishes NCC Review and Bi-monthly news letter
- Acts as the spokesperson of the Church.

Unit VII : Development

- Involves in social analysis and provides the philosophy, theology and priorities of development to member churches and related constituencies through advocacy, alliance and networking.
- Empowering of local congregations through worship, proclamation, nurture: diakonia is the focus.

Unit VIII : Urban Rural Mission

Builds up critical and political consciousness among the oppressed people and promotes people's movements which are involved in building up a society based on justice, peace and liberty.

- Mission in the present cultural, social economic, political milieu. In addition to these Units, there are three other concerns with separate sections:

(1) Desk on Dalit Concern

- To serve as a liberating force for all Dalits in India
- To undertake awareness building programmes within the churches about Dalit issues and problems.
- To foster fellowship and co-operation among various Dalit communities through net-working of Dalit action groups thereby to work towards the much needed unity and common sense of purpose among all Dalits.
- To document, disseminate information and undertake campaign against violation of such rights.

(2) North East India Concerns

- To be a liaison between the Churches in North East India
- To deal with women's concerns in that area.

(3) India Watch

- To respond to the emerging national situations
- To have the availability of current facts and figures and the knowledge of events happening all over the country to minority communities especially Christians.

Delhi Office of NCCI

Realising the need for NCCI is to respond promptly to these challenges, one of the effective measures taken by the NCCI to strengthen the New Delhi office of NCCI so that NCCI is not only close to the political metropolis but also close to other ecumenical national bodies such as CBCI, YMCA, YWCA and other religious minorities such as Muslims, Sikhs and Jains. The new office is located in St. Peter's Cathedral in the centre of ecumenical activity in Delhi.

Major Thrusts of NCCI

- Forging Christian Unity
- Churches' solidarity with the poor
- Renewal of the life of the Church through focus on activation of the local congregation which is the basic unit of the church, with
 1. Holistic ministry as its agenda
 2. Integrity of the witness of the Indian Church

WCC, CCA and NCCI

Ecumenically the Council is an integral part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

Publications

NCC Review

The National Council of Churches Review is the first ecumenical journal of India and official organ of the NCCI.

NCCI Newsletter

A Bi-monthly publication of news and information.

NCCI and CBCI

NCCI and the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) have some collaboration, especially in dealing with the national issues such as meeting the Challenges of fundamentalists identifying with political and social issues affecting Christian Church and Christian participation in nation building, dalit emancipation and fighting the ever increasing poverty in the country.

NCCI and CBCI jointly organised several programmes and consultations, of which the recent was the Ecumenical Assembly, held in 1999 at Cochin. The latest joint effort of CBCI and NCCI took place in the Church Leader's Meeting held on 11th July 2000 at NCCI Campus, Nagpur. The Joint Statement from the unique event is known as "NAGPUR STATEMENT OF CHURCHES IN INDIA".

The Statement Re-affirms that Christianity which is 1950 years old in this country has immensely contributed to nation-building quite disproportionately to its minority status of 2.5% of the total population of the country and that it respects every other faith; It Discerns that recently malicious propaganda of hatred as well as violence have been unleashed against minorities and especially Christians by communalists and religious fundamentalists on the pretext of forced conversions; It Demands that Government should take appropriate measures against all such forces of evil and restore peace and confidence among the minorities and harmony among all people; and lastly the statement says.

We Re-Dedicate Ourselves:

- * To observe the dawn of the New Millennium as the Year of the Lord and proclaim the Jubilee to the captives in all kinds of bondage.
- * To continue to serve the poor and the marginalised with greater commitment and to place more of our resources at the service of the poor.
- * To continue to work for the emancipation and empowerment of the Dalits, tribals and adivasis.
- * To continue to be involved in service and proclamation recognizing and upholding the values of free choice for all individuals and to desist from any form of forced and coercive conversion.
- * To continue dialogue with representatives of other Faiths who respect and value the rights of all human beings.
- * To act unitedly to affirm and safeguard our unity and ecumenical commitment.

We call upon all secular and democratic forces to unite in the common struggle against forces of fundamentalism and subjugation.

(Endorsed by forty-four participants)

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Ecumenical Structures in Asia

Kuncheria Pathil

The editor introduces the two important Church Organisations in Asia, namely, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). They are today functioning as parallel organisations with very similar and sometimes identical programmes. All ecumenically minded Christians are looking forward to that day when both transform themselves or rather merge so that all Churches in Asia give common witness and manifest their fundamental unity in Jesus Christ.

In the new millennium the Asian Churches are searching for new ecumenical structures in order to fulfill their common mission in Asia today. Any serious and scientific search for new ecumenical structures in Asia should start with studying and evaluating the already existing ecumenical structures. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) are the two important such ecumenical structures and organizations in Asia. FABC is the Catholic organization and the CCA is its ecumenical counterpart representing most of the other Churches in Asia. In this article I would like to introduce to our readers these two ecumenical bodies and their work very briefly and highlight their emerging collaboration in the various programs. I shall conclude this article by offering some suggestions and proposals in view of closer collaboration between FABC and CCA, which would pave the way for new ecumenical structures in Asia.

I. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a Roman Catholic organization for cooperation among the Bishops' Conferences in Asia which aims at some kind of networking and exchange among Catholic Churches in Asia. The second part of the 20th century witnessed an increasing awareness of "Asianness" or togetherness of Asian peoples reflected in the political and cultural awakening in

Asia. The formation of the FABC is an outcome of this new Asian awareness among the Catholic Churches of Asia.

1. Origin and Development of FABC

Its inception is in the enthusiasm shown and new initiatives taken by the Second Vatican Council. Back from the Council, the late Cardinal Valerian Gracias of Bombay remarked that Asian bishops do not know each other; they are more familiar with their western counterparts. The immediate background of the formation of the FABC was the visit of Pope Paul VI to Manila in 1970 to meet the Asian bishops. On the agenda of the general assembly there was a proposal or suggestion for the formation of FABC, in the name of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea. Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou Huan of Seoul was one of the pioneers of the idea. He recollects: "Those who favored such a conference feared that after it was proposed, nice comments would follow, the meeting would adjourn and the matter would end. I thought then that for the future and the evangelization of Asia in a rapidly developing world its bishops' conferences needed cooperation among themselves. Such mutual help would not only contribute greatly to the development of the Catholic Church in Asia, but it would have the potential of making a major contribution to human development, advancing justice and creating a human-being centered society, all of which were badly needed in many countries". Cardinal Kim of Seoul presented the proposal of the Asian Bishops' Conference in the Manila meeting in the presence of the Pope and the idea was found acceptable among the Asian bishops. The presidents of the National Bishops' Conferences of Asia met in 1971 to continue the discussion on this matter, and a committee was set up to draft a plan. The committee consisted of Cardinal Kim of Seoul, Cardinal Justinus Darmojuwono of Indonesia, Archbishop Teopisto Alberto of the Philippines, Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India and Bishop Fancis Hsu of Hong Kong.

In the meantime it was learned that the Roman Curia had certain apprehensions, fears and reservations about the idea of an Asian Bishops' Conference. But Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli, the then secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then Archbishop and Apostolic Pronuntio in Taipei, supported the idea, represented the Asian Bishops in Rome and clarified the idea before Rome. The final draft for the formation of

the FABC was approved at a meeting in Hong Kong in 1972 in which presidents of 12 Asian Bishops' Conferences participated. Finally, all the Cardinals of Asia, Kim Sou Hwan of Seoul, Valerian Gracias of Bombay, Thomas Cooray of Colombo, Justinus Darmojuwono of Semarang went to Rome to submit the proposal personally to Pope Paul VI, and they explained to him the idea, structure and function of FABC. The Pope was very much pleased with the proposal, as the Cardinals explained to him that the FABC had no binding authority on the bishops or National Bishops' Conferences; it was only an association for fraternal solidarity and mutual cooperation for the evangelization of Asia, especially, in the pastoral areas, such as, promotion of social justice, human development and peace. The Statutes of the FABC was approved by the Pope on November 16, 1972.

2. Membership and Structures of FABC

Formation of National Episcopal Conferences is an ecclesiological development of our times. Vatican II in its Decree on the Bishops instructed the formation and functioning of Episcopal Conferences to meet the pastoral challenges of the day: "Nowadays especially, bishops are frequently unable to fulfill their office suitably and fruitfully unless they work more harmoniously and closely every day with other bishops... Therefore this most sacred Synod considers it supremely opportune everywhere that bishops belonging to the same nation or region form an association and meet together at fixed times. Thus, when the insights of prudence and experience have been shared and views exchanged, there will emerge a holy union of energies in the service of the common good of the Churches". The nature of the Episcopal Conference, its competence and the laws of its functioning are explained in the Code of Canon Law. But the Code does not speak about any federation of Bishops' Conferences, though it recommends relationship among neighboring Episcopal Conferences: "Relations are to be fostered between Episcopal Conferences, especially neighboring ones, in order to promote and defend whatever is for the greater good". FABC was formed in this spirit of collaboration and exchange among the National Bishops' Conferences of Asia.

As on January 1999, FABC has 14 Episcopal Conferences as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan,

Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Besides, it has 10 Associate members: Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

FABC has a very special structure. It has no President. The highest governing body is the Plenary Assembly, which represents all the member Conferences. Naturally every Episcopal Conference will send delegates who are bishops. The Plenary Assembly meets once in 4 years. After the Plenary Assembly comes the Central Committee, composed of the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences, and they meet once in two years. Then follows the Standing Committee, consisting of five bishops selected by the Central Committee, which meets once a year to supervise the work of the FABC. The day-to-day work is carried out and executed by the Central Secretariat, headed by the Secretary General, who will be a bishop. But the actual work of the Central Secretariat is carried on by the Assistant Secretary General and his staff. The present Secretary General is Bishop Oswald Gomis of Sri Lanka, and the Assistant Secretary General is Fr. Edward Malone. The Office of the FABC is at present in Hong Kong (16 Caine Road, G.P.O. 2984, Hong Kong).

The programs and projects of the FABC are designed and executed by seven specialized offices. They are as follows: (1) Office of Evangelization (OE), (2) Office of Social Communication (OSC), (3) Office of Human Development (OHD), (4) Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy (OESC), (5) Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), (6) Office of Laity (OL), (7) Office of Theological Concerns (OTC). Each Office is directed and guided by a board of bishops, and run by an Executive Secretary. The Office of Laity has two additional sections, Women's Desk and Youth Desk.

3. Plenary Assemblies, Consultations and Seminars

The major events of the FABC are the Plenary Assemblies. The first Plenary Assembly was held at Taipei in 1974 around the theme, "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia". One of the important objectives of FABC was to promote evangelization in Asia. The Assembly realized that the first step for it is to study, analyze and discern the situation of Asia today. In the aspirations and quests of the peoples of Asia one may find a longing for Christ and the Gospel. Hence the urgency and need of the proclamation of the Gospel. The focus of evangelization in

Asia today has to be brought into by genuine local Churches, which have to be indigenous by becoming incarnate in each place, people and culture. In Asia the local Churches have to be in dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia and with the great masses of the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. Hence Asian Churches must give priority to missionary formation.

The second Plenary Assembly was held in Calcutta in 1978 and its theme was, "Prayer – The Life of the Church of Asia". In continuation of the discussions at the first assembly, the bishops of Asia emphasized the need of prayer as the source and sustaining power for the evangelization of Asia. The bishops were convinced that their "minds and hearts have to turn... to that source from which light and energy from the Lord come to us, to that river of life which must water and fecundate, vivify and nourish the entire life and activity of each of our communities and each one of us". It was not only an academic study and discussion on the theme, but also an introduction into and experiencing of some of the Asian approaches to prayer and meditation, guided by competent people. By this prayer experience, the bishops sought for new ways and means so that the Church in Asia might become a genuine sign and sacrament of the God's presence and action. The Assembly reaffirmed its deep conviction in faith that prayer is truly the life of the Church in Asia and the heart of its mission and ministry. "God's love, the power of God's love is the only force which can truly renew the world and history".

The Third Plenary Assembly, gathered in Bangkok 1982, discussed the theme, "The Church – A Community of Faith in Asia". The FABC assemblies, joint-institutes, seminars and formation courses had slowly led the Asian Catholic Churches to a greater community of vision, values and priorities. At that point the bishops thought that they should reflect together what it means to be the Church or a Community of Faith in Asia. The Church in Asia is a sign and instrument of the unity of the peoples of Asia. The main concern of the Church, therefore, should be mission, service and commitment to Asian peoples. In the specific Asian context, the Church has to be involved in human development, reconciliation, promotion and defense of human dignity and human rights. While emphasizing the mystery or communion aspect of the Church, the bishops wanted to spell out what this mystery concretely means in its own being and life and in relation to other

communities in whose midst Christians live. The Statement of the Assembly is an attempt to articulate an Asian ecclesiology.

"The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia" was the theme of the Fourth Plenary Assembly Tokyo 1986. The presence of a good number of laity in the Assembly was an important moment in the life of the Asian Churches. The Statement of the Assembly underlined the importance of the mission of the laity in Asia: "The saga of the laity themselves, preserving their faith through long centuries of their history in countries such as Korea and Japan, stirs our imagination and inspires our hearts. Under changed circumstances, today the laity of Asia continue to share zealously in the mission of the Church as a leaven in the world and a sign of the Reign of God". Acknowledging and promoting the mission of the laity demands renewal of ecclesial structures on the basis of collegiality, communion and co-responsibility. It calls for a radical shift so as to recognize the laity as full-fledged members of the Church with their own gifts, rights and duties.

The Fifth Plenary Assembly was held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1990, around the theme, "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium". In the 1990s, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, the bishops of Asia wanted to take stock of the present situation, to hear what God is speaking to us today and to rearticulate the mission of the Church for the new millennium. In spite of continuing persistence of poverty, oppression, injustice, discrimination against women, violation of human rights, exploitation and pollution of nature, militarization, political conflicts, plight of millions of refugees etc, there are indeed signs of hope, such as, awakening of the marginalized and the oppressed, struggles and movements for justice, for women's rights and human rights, movements for democracy, ecological movements, ecumenical and interreligious movements, search for new spiritualities and new forms of communities etc. etc. The bishops once again, in the light of the ecclesiological reflections of the previous assemblies, looked at closely the face of the Church and asked what should the Church be in Asia today, and what are the new ways of being Church in Asia. The Church should be a Communion of Communities living in companionship and partnership, within itself and in relation to people of other faiths. It requires participatory structures in its being and life. It has to be a leaven of transformation in the world and a prophetic sign. It has to be a servant of the Lord and of humanity, incarnating the compassion of Jesus himself.

The Sixth Plenary Assembly met in Manila in 1995, and the theme of the assembly was, "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life". It was also the Silver Jubilee celebration of FABC, as it was in 1975 for the first time Asian Bishops met in Manila to meet Pope Paul VI and a resolution for the foundation of FABC was formally approved by the Asian Bishops. In Manila the bishops confessed that even after 25 years, the goal of conscientizing the local Churches and building a communion of Asian Churches was still far from realized, despite the truly remarkable advances already made in this regard. The Church's mission in Asia today has been always the focus of the FABC discussions in all its assemblies. It was sharpened and articulated in this assembly in terms of promotion of life in Asia: "How do the disciples of Jesus in Asia view this life that is welling up from the depths of Asian peoples, their histories, their habitats and their cultures? What service can the disciples of Jesus in Asia offer to affirm, enhance, defend and promote this life?" The Churches were called to say "no" to the "death-dealing forces" in Asia, and "yes" to the "life-giving forces". Asians are searching not simply for the meaning of life, but for life itself, which is denied to them. Life is not only a task and challenge, but also a gift, a mystery: "At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. This deep interiority draws people to experience harmony and inner peace and infuses ethics into all of creation". The Church's response to life has to be in the footsteps of Jesus, who came that all peoples may have life in its abundance. His death was for the life of all, and he rose up conquering death and transmitting the gift of the Spirit upon all. Christian discipleship is just following the footsteps of Jesus in the service of life for all in abundance. Finally, the Assembly made an appeal to focus on five major areas of discipleship and service in the coming years – the Asian Family, the Youth, Women and Girl-child, Ecology and Displaced People/ Migrants.

"A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service" was the theme of the Seventh Plenary Assembly, held in Bangkok in January 2000. It was in fact a follow-up of the themes of the sixth assembly and of the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1998. The FABC wanted to look back on the passing century and to look forward to the 21st century, and to listen to the call of the Spirit to

the local Churches in Asia. It is a call for renewal of the Church in Asia for its mission of love and service. "It is a call to the local Churches to be faithful to Asian cultural, spiritual and social values and thus to be truly inculturated local Churches". The Assembly reviewed and reiterated the FABC's vision of renewal (a gathering of the fruits of the previous assemblies) and its meaning and implications for the local Churches of Asia today. In the light of the present issues and challenges, the Assembly identified the important areas of pastoral concern which were the same as that of the previous assembly, namely, the Youth, Women, the Family, Indigenous People, Sea-based and Land-based Migrants and Refugees.

Though the Plenary Assemblies are very significant as they give the direction and orientation to the whole work of the FABC, its major studies and projects are being implemented by the seven special offices, which we have listed above. Many of these Offices conducted series of Courses, Consultations, Seminars, and Workshops on a regular basis in the areas of their concerns. Some of those programs were named as "Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate" (BIMA, conducted by the Office of Evangelization), "Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs" (BIRA, organized by the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs), "Bishops' Institute for Social Action" (BISA, conducted by the Office of Human Development), "Bishops' Institute for the Lay Apostolate" (BILA, organized by the Office of Laity). Within the limited scope of this short article we cannot go into the details of the work of these Offices. We only note that some of these Offices made excellent studies, statements, and other documents. Most of those programs provided substantial and very useful training, formation, exposure and immersion, and action-reflection opportunities to hundreds of bishops, priests, religious, and laity from the different local Churches of Asia. It is these programs and the people who participated in them that made a significant impact on the Churches in Asia. The work of the "Theological Advisory Commission" (TAC) of the FABC, established in 1986, has to be also noted. This Commission's main contribution is the three theological studies it initiated and completed, first on "Interreligious Dialogue", the second on "Inculturation and Local Church", and the third, on "Church and Politics in Asia". The TAC also initiated the search for a "New Paradigm of Theological Reflection". Later on, the TAC was transformed into the "Office of Theological Concerns".

4. Literature and Documents

Studies, Articles and Papers on the themes and concerns of the FABC, especially those presented at the Assemblies, Consultations and Seminars, and Statements of the various meetings are regularly published as FABC Papers. As announced by the FABC, these Papers are "designed to bring the thinking of Asian experts to a wider audience and to develop critical analysis of the problems facing the Church in Asia". As of January 2000, FABC has published 93 such Papers. FABC Central Secretariat also publishes a quarterly, FABC News letter. We have listed above seven specialized Offices of the FABC, each with its own specific area or concern. Many of these Offices also publish their own respective Newsletters.

The important documents of the Plenary Assemblies, Conferences and Consultations of the FABC are published in two volumes, entitled 'For All the Peoples of Asia'. The first volume was edited by Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales and Fr. Catalino G. Arevalo, and published in 1992 by the Claretian Publications, Manila and Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. The first volume contains the documents from 1970 to 1991. The second volume contains the documents from 1991 to 1996, and it is edited by Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers and published in 1997.

5. Achievements and Contributions of FABC

I do not think that time is yet ripe for evaluating the achievements of FABC. FABC's work and contributions have not yet reached the grass-root levels of the local Churches. Moreover, a scientific analysis and critical study of the FABC is beyond the scope of this article. However, I would like to point out five significant contributions made by the FABC:

- 1) Before the formation of the FABC, the Asian Churches were strangers to each other; they knew better and were more related to their western counterparts, and not to their close neighbors. FABC became instrumental in bringing the Asian Catholic Churches together by bonds of mutual knowledge, mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity, and mutual collaboration. The Churches entered into greater communion by sharing in prayer, resources, both material and spiritual, by the sharing of personnel and theological insights and by their common responses to the Asian problems. This increasing communion among the local Churches in Asia made them really "One Church", "the FABC Community".

2) Through its work of the last 30 years FABC developed and projected a vision of an Asian Church, vision of "a new way of being Church in Asia". This vision is succinctly articulated in the Statement of the last Plenary Meeting. The Church has to be a "Communion of Communities", and "a participatory Church", within itself and in relation to other communities. In the Church the laity, clergy and religious should live and work together as equals, as brothers and sisters, sharing the gifts of all and accepting each other. Life together should begin in smaller or basic communities, guided and nourished by the Word of God, supporting each other and creating a new society. Church must function in the Asian society as a "prophetic sign", as "salt and leaven", pointing to and preparing the way to the Kingdom of God. It means the primary concern of the Church shall not be one of being merely "spiritual" or "ecclesial", but of being committed to the needs and aspirations of the Asian people. The last two Assemblies of FABC have invited the Churches to move into the midst of peoples issues and problems in the world, and identified five major pastoral areas, the Asian Family, Youth, Women and Girl-child, Ecology and Displaced People/ Migrants. In Asia the proclamation of Christ and the Gospel is primarily through "witness" and "dialogue of life". In Asia where the vast majority of the people are poor, the Church has to be a "Church of the poor". In Asia where the youth outnumbers all other age groups, the Church should become a "Church of the Young." As Asian society is marked by diversity of peoples and cultures, the Church has to become "truly local Churches". Christian faith or Gospel has to be made incarnate in each culture. The very first Assembly of the FABC stated clearly as follows: "To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time of our history, is the building up of a truly local Church". Hence inculturation is strongly recommended to be one of the top priorities among the Asian Churches. In the meantime, as Asia is well known for its deep religiosity, the Church in Asia has to become a real "spiritual movement" marked by deep interiority and contemplation. This overall vision of an Asian Church is a challenging one, but yet to be translated and realized in each context.

3) Dialogue is the key word in almost all the documents of the FABC. The relationship between Church and dialogue, mission and dialogue, and inculturation and dialogue is clarified and highlighted by

the FABC in several documents. In the Asian context where the Church exists side by side with various other living religions, dialogue is to be its concrete mode of existence and the basic mode of mission. In the Asian context proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue are not mutually exclusive, but essentially related. Proclamation can be fruitfully and effectively done only through dialogue, and dialogue, especially dialogue of life, is the ordinary way of proclamation. FABC emphasizes that in the Asian context of religious pluralism, the Church has to emphasize the modality of mission as presence, witness, service and dialogue. When we respect the other person and his/her faith, the proclamation has to be necessarily dialogical. FABC's repeated call to the Asian Churches for a Triple Dialogue, dialogue with Asia's poor, dialogue with the rich cultures of Asia, and dialogue with the religious and spiritual traditions of Asia has great impact in the theological thinking and in the lives of the Asian Churches. The Asian Churches are fully convinced today that only by such a deep immersion into the Asian reality, into its peoples, cultures and spiritual traditions that the Church will become really Asian. This is the only way for the Asian Churches to become fully inculturated local Churches.

4) In the attitude and approach of Church towards the other religions, the FABC has made a radical shift towards a clearly positive understanding of them. The very first Assembly of the FABC at Taipei in 1974 underlined the salvific role of the other religions: "We accept them (the Great Religions of Asia) as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation...over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength... And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?" The implications are clear: the major world religions were born and developed in Asia, and they are remarkable for their spiritual values and interiority. Naturally they have been and are the means and ways of salvation for their believers. It means that God's grace and revelation and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit are present also in other religions, as all peoples are God's people. God has no partiality; those who fear Him and do what is right according to their conscience are acceptable to Him, and they are given whatever is necessary for their salvation. "This positive appreciation of other religions is not a conclusion drawn from some theological argumentation, but an attitude and conviction born out of a

direct, experiential encounter with men and women who are followers of other religions". If God's revelation is present also in other religious traditions and in the history of other peoples, Christians have to remain open to them in order to have a fuller understanding of God's revelation, its unity and continuity, especially the relationship of other revelations to the revelation in Jesus Christ. The FABC did not enter into an academic and theological discussion on the source of the salvific efficacy of other religions, namely whether it is derived from God independent of Christ or through Jesus Christ.

5) During the last 30 years FABC has developed and experimented a theological methodology which is sometimes called "the pastoral spiral methodology", which is a form of socio-cultural and faith analysis. It is a further refinement of the methodology of Latin American Liberation theology. The methodology of Liberation theology has three steps: (1) Social analysis by which the root causes of the problems, issues and unjust structures and systems of the society are exposed. (2) Hermeneutics or Interpretation by which, on the one hand, solutions to the problems is searched in the light of the Word of God/Faith, and on the other hand, Word of God or Faith itself is challenged by new interpretations. (3) Pastoral praxis by which action plans are initiated in order to change the unjust structures of the present order. The FABC has added two more components to this methodology of the Liberation theology. Social analysis can become purely academic, abstract and biased. In order to avoid this danger, analysis must be preceded by real exposure and immersion on the part of the theologizing subjects into the actual reality and context. The second additional component in the process of theologizing is a contemplative dimension/ prayer. The analysis and interpretation / reflection can become distorted due to human sin/ selfishness. Hence prayer and contemplation should accompany the analysis-reflection-action process of theologizing. Thus the theological methodology which FABC has proposed has five steps though they cannot be completely separated from one another: (1) Exposure- Immersion, (2) Socio-cultural Analysis, (3) Interpretation/ Reflection, (4) Prayer/ Contemplation, (5) Pastoral Planning and Action. It must be noted that this methodology has been developed mainly by the seminars, consultations, workshops and exposure programs of the BISA series(Bishops' Institute for Social Action, organized by the FABC Office of Human Development).

6. Critical Observations

1) FABC has several inherent limitations. As it is a conference of the Bishops, major part of the laity, clergy and religious are not involved in the work of the FABC. Most of the Catholic population in Asia, including priests and religious, have not even heard about the FABC and its documents. Naturally, FABC studies and documents and their results have not reached the local congregations, and they did not in any way affect them. Some people complain that even the Holy See is not aware of the FABC documents. There was a widespread complaint that the Synod of the Bishops for Asia did not give sufficient attention to the FABC documents.

2) FABC documents are very good. But apparently there is no will and determination on the part of the bishops, nor any mechanism, to implement them in the local Churches and congregations. The result is a plain contradiction between theory and practice. Even those bishops who have suggested, drafted and approved several of those ideas and proposals, they themselves do not support or even resent when some of the activist groups try to implement them in their dioceses. FABC has never made a serious and scientific study and evaluation on how its thrusts are being implemented in the different local Churches in Asia. Of course, it should be noted that the FABC has no authority whatsoever for any implementation, and it cannot address to each concrete situation, as Asian realities and situations are heterogeneous. Changes can happen if only the bishops take the various ideas, suggestions and proposals coming from the FABC seriously and try to implement them in their own dioceses.

3) I do not know much about the financial position of the FABC. I think that the major portion of it comes from the Western Churches and funding agencies, and due to the hard work of some individuals. But how long can the Asian Churches depend on the sources from outside? It is a fact that the western sources are being dried up more and more, in spite of a lot of willingness and generosity that are still there. Time has come that the Asian Churches assume full responsibility for the FABC and search for ways and means for local resources. Of course, Asian Churches may always welcome and even solicit the support from our fellow Christians from the other Churches as it was the practice of the early Churches to express the common fellowship and solidarity.

4) One of the acute problems of the FABC is its lack of continuity and follow-up. There is no mechanism and structure for continuity and follow-up in the different local and national Churches. All the bishops of the National Conferences are not really aware of what is happening in the FABC assemblies and consultations, as only very few of them take turn to participate in those meetings. Those meetings often become the private engagements of some bishops. Communication, follow-up and implementation do not really take place in the local Churches. In order to remedy this problem to some extent, I would like to propose the establishment of a "Commission for FABC" similar to the various other Commissions of the National Episcopal Conferences, headed by a group of bishops and supported by an office in every National Episcopal Conference. This commission can disseminate the FABC thinking and documents in each country and it can function as a link between the National Conference and the FABC.

5) In the process of writing this short article I have come to realize that there are no substantial sources to study the history, development, structures and contributions of the FABC. I think it is high time a history of the FABC was ready. A handbook on FABC is now a must for the wider use of the Churches, especially for the use of students in the Asian theological faculties, colleges and seminaries. FABC's significant work of the last 30 years shall not be allowed to go in vain. It should become a source of inspiration and an indispensable tool and material for the ongoing theological reflections in Asia.

II. Christian Conference of Asia (C. C. A.)

It is not my intention here to write a short history of the CCA, or to make a scientific evaluation of its work. This is just a short write-up and introduction on CCA, especially meant for the members of the Catholic Church who are not familiar with the CCA and its work. It would have been perhaps better that some one who has been involved in the life and works of the CCA should make this contribution. I am fully aware of the limitations of this short presentation. But I believe that a review of the CCA by an outsider may have its own value.

1. Origins and Objectives

All the modern ecumenical movements and organizations were born, in fact, out of the missionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Christian Conference of Asia was not an exception. The

immediate outcome of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 was the formation of International Missionary Council (IMC) and the numerous National Missionary Councils. The latter gradually were transformed into National Christian Councils and National Councils of Churches (NCC). The National Councils were forums of fellowship and collaboration, especially in the area of the mission of the Church, while protecting all the same the autonomy and authority of the member Churches.

The Churches and National Councils of Churches in Asia gradually felt the need of closer fellowship and ecumenical co-operation in view of their common witness and mission in the fast changing Asia. This idea was floated for the first time at the Tambaram (Madras) meeting of the IMC in 1938. The first step was the establishment of the East Asia Regional Office of the IMC and WCC at the Eastern Asia Christian Conference, held in Bangkok in 1949, in view of a closer ecumenical fellowship among the Asian Churches while at the same time linking them to the international ecumenical movements and organizations. The western Churches and many of their leaders were at first very reluctant to approve the idea of a separate Christian Conference of Asia for fear of loosing their control, of additional financial burden and of weakening the international ecumenical movement. Many Asian Church leaders resented this reluctance on the part of the western Churches in creating an Asian ecumenical structure. Formation of "Asia Council on Ecumenical Mission" in 1955 by some Protestant Churches in Asia under the leadership of Bishop Enrique Sobrepena of Philippines was seen by many western Church leaders as a reaction. Finally the IMC and the WCC had to give in, and the leaders of the international ecumenical movements became gradually convinced that the regional ecumenical structures were necessary and essential and they could only strengthen the international ecumenical movement and its organizations. A concrete proposal was discussed at the Bangkok Consultation (1956) of the Asian Churches and National Councils of Churches, sponsored by the IMC and the WCC, and it was decided to form the East Asia Christian Conference. The EACC was inaugurated at Prapat, Indonesia, in 1957. At the Singapore Assembly held in 1973 the name was changed to Christian Conference of Asia. The formal Inaugural Assembly was held in 1959 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The term Conference is contrasted with Council. In a council of "Churches", only the Churches can have primary membership, whereas in a "Conference" other Christian bodies, organizations and Councils of Churches can have equal membership. Moreover, the term Conference suggests a "movement" and a "gathering", rather than an institutional or legal body. CCA has no authority over its members, but is at the service of the member Churches. The vision, purpose and objectives of the CCA are clearly stated in its Constitution as follows: "Believing that the purpose of God for the Church in Asia is life together in a common obedience of witness to the mission of God in the world, the CCA exists as an organ and forum of continuing co-operation among the Churches and national Christian bodies in Asia within the framework of the wider ecumenical movement. CCA is committed to the equal participation of women, men, youth, clergy and laity in the Church and society". Its objectives are promotion and strengthening of unity, promotion of joint-action for mission, encouragement of Asian theology, sharing of resources and personnel, common studies and research, Christian response to the challenges and changes in society, promotion of relationship among people of other faiths, and promotion of human development, justice and the caring of nature.

2. Membership and Structures

The Constitution; Rules, Regulations, Structures and Programs of the CCA has been revised several times ever since its inception. I do not go into those historical details within the scope of this short article. According to the Constitution of the CCA, the "Churches joining the CCA must be Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". As of today the CCA has a membership of about 100 Churches and 16 Councils of Churches from 16 Asian countries including Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand. The author could not get the up-to-date list of the member Churches and Councils.

The General Assembly is the supreme body the CCA. It comprises the voting delegates elected or appointed by the member Churches and Councils, the Officers of the CCA and other non-voting participants. The Assembly normally meets once in five years convened by the General Committee. The General Committee is the responsible body, which implements the decisions of the General Assembly between

the meetings of the General Assembly. The General Committee normally meets once in eighteen months. It consists of the Officers of the CCA, that is, the four Presidents, the Honorary Treasurer and the General Secretary, one member from each country, and up to five additional members appointed by the incoming General Committee. The Executive Committee deals with the routine matters or other urgent matters in between the meetings of the General Committee. The Executive Committee comprises the CCA Officers and three to five elected members from the General Committee. General Secretary is the chief executive of the CCA, and he/she is elected by the General Committee for a period of five years, which may be extended for another term subject to the age of retirement, stipulated by the Rules.

The recent CCA Assembly (2000 June) held in Tomohon, Indonesia, made a revision and restructuring in the Program Structure and Program Committees. The Program Areas and Committees were reduced from nine to three in view of proper co-ordination and lack of financial resources. The Three Areas and the corresponding Program Committees are as follows: (1) Faith, Mission and Unity, (2) Justice, International Affairs, Development and Service, (3) Ecumenical Formation, Gender Justice and Youth Ministry. Each of these Areas will have a Program Committee of about 12 members and corresponding Executive and Administrative Staff persons. It was also proposed in Tomohon that separate Desk for Women and Youth are to be set up provided funds are available. As the scope of this article is very limited, I do not want to go to the details of the Program Structure and its actual functioning. It is the task of the General Secretariat to execute and supervise all these programs. The General Secretary will be assisted by two Associate General Secretaries, one in charge of finance and the other in charge of Communication and Relationships.

3. CCA Assemblies

General Assemblies of the CCA are, as put by Feliciano Carino, the present Secretary General, first and foremost occasions of celebration, where the Churches in Asia celebrate their unity in common worship, study, sharing and action. They are the supreme decision-making bodies of CCA. The Assemblies provide opportunities for the Churches to assess the work of the CCA, evaluate all its programs and set new directions and guidelines. Daily worship, Bible studies and Statements on Public Issues are the integral parts of the Assemblies, in addition

to the routine elections of the Officers and the members of the various Committees.

Every General Assembly is centered on a theme, which is presented by various speakers and discussed by the Assembly. The theme of first assembly held in Prapat, Indonesia, was "The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia". In Prapat the Churches affirmed their willingness to be together and to live a shared life, especially in view of their common evangelistic task. CCA's major thrust is mission of the Church in Asia. Right at the outset the perspective on mission was focussed on the Church's commitment to the transformation of the Asian society by eradicating poverty, illiteracy, injustice and disease, and by developing a healthy nationalism within which indigenous and foreign values would be held in creative tension. The Second Assembly was in fact the official Inaugural Assembly of the EACC, which was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1959. Its theme was "Witnessing Together". The Assembly called the member Churches and Councils to be concerned not with themselves, but with the world around them and face the questions of life of the Asian people, enter into real conversation with them and to be witnesses for Christ. The Third Assembly was held in Bangkok in 1964, and the theme was, "The Christian Community within the Human Community". The Assembly emphasized that the Church as a community exists for the sake of the wider human community. The document of this assembly had a lasting effect on all other programs of the CCA. There were two main concerns centered on the main theme, the Church's dialogue with the world and the call for the renewal of the Church. The Church is not to be a self-centered community, but it is a community of those who have responded to the Gospel and thus called out of the world in order to be again sent out into the world. Training of the laity and their empowerment to witness to Christ in the world, dialogue with the people of other faiths and working with them to achieve our common goals, and renewal of the Church by living in Asia's cultures both in its thought and life-style were some of the thrusts made by this assembly.

The Fourth Assembly met in Bangkok again in 1968, and the theme was, "In Christ All Things Hold Together". Two important points were raised at this assembly by D. T. Niles who was the inspiring and moving force behind the EACC from its very inception, and served it as the General Secretary for many years. The first was the task of the EACC to mobilize a group of ecumenical frontier persons who could take

risks that Churches cannot and thus pioneer in new ways and styles of Christian witness. They could in turn influence the life of the Churches. The second was the rise of confessionalism, which threatens the autonomy of the Asian Churches. Should an Asian Church maintain its allegiance to a worldwide confessional body, or should it enter into a new relationship with the other Asian local Churches and address their immediate common tasks in Asia? These issues are even today very relevant.

The Fifth Assembly held in Singapore in 1973 with the theme, "Christian Action in Asian Struggle", was a turning point in many ways. The name East Asia Christian Council was changed to Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). The Constitution was changed to ensure better representation of women, youth, clergy and laity. Although the EACC had an Office in Bangkok, it functioned in a decentralized way that the staff operated from their own countries. Now for the sake of better co-ordination Singapore was chosen as the location for the General Secretariat of the CCA, and the Singapore office began to function in 1974. Asia Ecumenical Course was initiated in 1975 as the training ground for the ecumenical leaders of Asia. As the FABC was formally inaugurated at Taipei in 1974, CCA began to contact with it and started to have some collaboration. A more important change was reflected also in the choice of the theme. CCA was ready to launch more intense action joining the struggles of the Asian people. Development issue, social justice, prophetic witness and Christian action clearly emerged at the center of all the activities of the CCA.

Penang, Malaysia, was the venue of the Sixth Assembly held in 1977, and its theme was, "Jesus Christ in Asian Suffering and Hope". The assembly witnessed to a time of suffering of the people of Asia, when the Churches have to avoid the triumphalistic attitude and the crusading spirit and to play the role of the suffering servant, and to be involved in the struggles and sufferings of the people. Then only the fellowship of the Churches would become real, the life together meaningful and Christian faith relevant. The Seventh Assembly was held in Bangalore, India, in 1981 around the theme, "Living in Christ with People". The concept of "people" was the emerging theological trend of the time. The assembly stated in a succinct way that the Asian people are rural; Asian people are young; Asian people are poor; Asian people are religious; Asian people have ancient cultures and they search for ethnic identities. But in a restricted sense people

means the oppressed, the poor, the victimized, the marginalized, those who live in the periphery. As Jesus always identified with such "people", the Asian Churches were called to be with the people.

The Eighth Assembly was gathered in Seoul, Korea, in 1985, and its theme was, "Jesus Christ Sets Free to Serve". This theme was chosen in the larger context of Liberation Theology and its specific form of Korean Minjung Theology, and to express solidarity with the Churches of Korea in their struggles for democracy and for the reunification of their divided country. Jesus Christ has set us free to serve the cause of freedom in the midst of the captivities both in the Church and society. Among the various reports of the Assembly, there was one, which condemned the Indonesian occupation of East Timor and supported the right for self-determination of the people of East Timor. The Indonesian delegates were embarrassed by this and they reacted by withdrawing from all the decision-making bodies and processes of the CCA. They said that they needed more time to reflect on and re-consider their participation in the CCA.

In December 1987 CCA was expelled from Singapore by the Singapore Government alleging that the CCA violated the rules of Societies registered in Singapore not to indulge in any political activities, or use Singapore as a base to do political activities in other countries. The allegation against the CCA was that it supported "Liberation movements" and "pro-Communist movements" in other countries by funding them, and by publications through the "CCA News". The Staff had to leave Singapore immediately and the Government closed down the Office of the CCA and all its accounts in Singapore were frozen. In April 1988 an Extraordinary meeting of the General Committee with some special invitees was held in Hong Kong to assess the situation and decide on the future. The meeting declared solidarity with the CCA and condemned the action of the Singapore Government as "unwarranted and untenable". The open letter drawn up by the meeting said that "the charges were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the Church in society and of the way the Church and State must relate to each other". The Office of the CCA was again decentralized, and the Staff functioned from Osaka, Hong Kong, Chiang Mai and Manila. A positive outcome of the expulsion was that the Indonesian Churches, which withdrew their active involvement in the CCA at the Seoul Assembly, declared solidarity with the CCA and reactivated their membership.

The Ninth Assembly met in Manila, Philippines, in 1990, around the theme, "Christ our Peace – Building a Just Society". At a time of crisis for CCA and for many Asians, the assembly expressed the hope in Jesus Christ who is our Peace. Peace or "shalom" is much more than absence of war or suffering; it is a vision of wholeness of life, where all peoples live in harmony as a single family. Peace means and implies the building up of a just society. After the expulsion from Singapore the CCA staff were working from different places as an interim arrangement. Manila assembly gave the green signal to find a place to locate the CCA Office. A final decision was taken by the Executive Committee of the CCA in 1991 to acquire the Lutheran Theological Seminary campus in Shatin, Hong Kong, for the CCA, and the Center was declared open in 1993.

The Tenth Assembly of the CCA met in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1995. The theme of the assembly was, "Hope in God in a Changing Asia". In the midst of innumerable threats to life and immense human sufferings, the assembly called the Asian Churches to be the bearers of hope in God, and be a united witness to affirm that life is God's gift which must be sustained, protected and upheld in a changing Asia. Colombo assembly marked a new beginning of CCA's collaboration with the FABC and a common search for new ecumenical structures and programs. The Eleventh Assembly was the last in this series of CCA assemblies which was gathered in Tomohon, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, from 1 – 6, June 2000, in which this author also participated. The theme of the Assembly was "Time for Fullness of Life for All". It was very similar to the theme of the Special Synod of Bishops for Asia, held in Rome by the Catholic Church in 1998, "Jesus Christ the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly'(Jn 10:10)". All people are called by God to the fullness of life and it is, in reality, offered to all, not only to Christians. Christians are not offering salvation to others, but only proclaiming it. The fullness of life is offered not merely after death, but it is offered here and now, in relation to our concrete lives here. The vast majority of the Asians lack this fullness of life as they are deprived of their dignity as human persons. The Tomohon assembly was really a celebration of fullness of life, a "millennial" celebration of the CCA together with the Christian communities of Minahasa who made it their assembly with their presence in thousands and with their warm and generous hospitality.

4. Programs of CCA

It will be a total distortion to equate the CCA with the work of its General Assemblies. The General Assemblies are meant only to assess the ongoing programs of the CCA and to give orientations and guidelines. The real work of the CCA are carried out by its various program units and departments at the Asian level as well as at the Regional and National levels. Several hundreds of Consultations, Seminars, Courses, Workshops, Study Groups, Exposure and Action Programs, International, Regional and National Conferences, Study Reports and Publications were made in the last 40 years. These programs really made radical and substantial changes in the lives of the people and of the Churches in Asia. Within the scope of this article it is impossible to present the work of the various program units and departments of the CCA. I shall here just indicate and list the areas of the work of the various programs of the CCA without making any attempt to classify them under the existing clusters of operation:

- 1) Mission and Evangelism has always been one of the major programs. The concept of mission and its consequences, implications and applications for Asia today were explored.
- 2) Church and Society was another major area of concern and action. Studies, conscientization, and action in the areas of social justice, human rights, development, problems of refugees, migrants, internally displaced people etc were the concrete programs.
- 3) Urban and Rural Mission has been another thrust. Organizing, conscientizing and educating workers, peasants etc in different Asian countries was a regular and widespread activity with substantial results.
- 4) International Affairs was another important area of concern, action and study. Several programs and actions for the promotion of peace, freedom, especially religious freedom, civil rights, reconciliation between nations and peoples were initiated. The CCA Statements on Public Issues were important and they made a substantial contribution by building awareness and creating international opinion.
- 5) Indochina Concerns has been a very specific area of action in recent years. As the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have been suffering for a long time, they specially needed healing, reconciliation and development. The Churches in these countries also needed leadership development and ecumenical formation.

6) Theological Concerns was another major area, which merged with several areas. Major theological issues emerging from various areas were thrashed out by several theological consultations. Theological methodology was of special concern. "Congress of Asian Theologians" (CATS) was initiated and followed-up by biennial gatherings of Asian theologians.

7) Relationship with other International Ecumenical bodies, like, WCC, IMC and WSCF, with Regional and National Ecumenical bodies, with the CCA member Churches, National Councils of Churches and with non-member Churches like the Roman Catholic Church, especially the FABC, the Evangelicals and Pentecostals was another area of concern and action.

8) Women's Issues, their rights and liberation, and theological education and conscientization programs for them have been from the beginning a special area of action, and it yielded substantial results.

9) Programs for Youth, their leadership training, education, faith formation etc was another special area which has been also very much rewarding.

10) Education, lay-training, ecumenical formation, theological formation etc were other important areas of concern and action.

11) The Other Living Faiths of Asia and dialogue with them was a major area of study and action, which opened up new concepts and styles of mission and new relationships.

12) Medical Mission, especially rural health and allied areas were also part of the program.

13) Third World Tourism and related issues like prostitution, HIV, rehabilitation programs etc were areas of recent concern of the CCA.

14) Asian Christian Arts, Music, Liturgy, Asian Hymns, Asian Spirituality and Asian Reading of the Bible were other important areas of concern and concrete action.

5. Publications and Literature

Starting with occasional Bulletins in 1960, later on CCA launched a series of publications and books, mostly proceedings and papers of the conferences, consultations and seminars, study reports, minutes, statements and other documents. Lists of CCA publications are available. Due to the profusion of publications, which have piled up on

the shelves for years and due to financial constraints, CCA has now put some limits to its publications. They are now publishing CCA News quarterly, CTC Bulletin biannually, in addition to minutes of various meetings, resource materials, and the papers of a few major programs. From Prapat to Colombo, authored by Yap Kim Hao, the former General Secretary of CCA, and published by CCA in 1995, is a short history of the CCA from 1957 to 1995. It contains a bibliography on CCA.

6. Some Observations

An assessment and evaluation of the work of the CCA is out of place here. Moreover, I believe that such a critical evaluation can be done only from the inside by someone involved in the whole life and work of the CCA and its member Churches and Councils. This author is not qualified or competent for doing such a job. However let me make a few casual observations:

1) CCA through its work of the last 40 years has brought the Asian Churches of diverse confessional alliances to a closer fellowship and to a certain maturity and Asian identity. The missionary Churches of Asia during the Colonial period were self-centered Churches with their own lives, institutions and growth. CCA has helped the Asian Churches to locate themselves in the midst of Asian realities involving themselves in the lives and cultures of Asian peoples and in their sufferings and struggles. The work of the CCA inspired the Churches to participate in building up a New Asia in collaboration with all other Asians.

2) CCA through its balanced approach and openness has achieved certain theological respectability, mainly due to the involvement, guidance, support and inspiration of the best theological minds in Asia. Through its various programs, especially by the Ecumenical Formation Courses, CCA has formed quite a sizable number of "ecumenical frontier persons" who really do influence the life and work of the member Churches and the ecumenical movement. A significant momentum has been given in the search for genuine Asian theologies and for new theological methodologies.

3) In my opinion, the CCA Statements on Public Issues are very outstanding contributions, where the Churches in Asia are really performing their vital prophetic role in the Asian society and in the midst of the Nations today. They have tremendously influenced public opinion and awareness building both in the Church and in the world.

4) CCA's continued ecumenical work and efforts have contributed to the waning and almost disappearance of Confessionalism from among the Asian Protestant Churches. To my personal surprise, among the four members of the Presidium elected at the last General Assembly at Tomohon, two were Anglicans. Nobody seems to have bothered about it. But unfortunately, I am afraid to say, parochialism and narrow nationalism and personal interests have been showing their ugly face on certain occasions, especially during the elections and other procedures.

5) In my limited study of the CCA, I have noted that the themes of the General Assemblies never gained their momentum, nor were they thoroughly discussed in depth or conclusions drawn, probably due to the preoccupation of the assemblies with too many things, especially due to election procedures and other business matters.

6) I would propose a thorough study and evaluation on how the CCA's work, theological studies and contributions, documents and suggestions have influenced the life and work of the member Churches. Is there still a gulf and dichotomy between the CCA thinking and the life and practice of the Churches? Whatever be the shortcomings and failures of the Churches in Asia and of the CCA, one thing is certain: God's Spirit is at work in bringing the diverse and different Asian Churches into a fellowship in the forum of the CCA.

III. Towards New Ecumenical Structures in Asia

What becomes very clear from these short presentations on FABC and CCA is that they are parallel organizations and movements with parallel programs. They are organizing very similar or almost identical programs and projects, but separately. But both are Christian ecumenical movements and organizations. The question is : Are there sufficient reasons why they should continue to operate separately? In this ecumenical era why can't Catholics and other Christians collaborate and work together, especially when their programs and projects are the same? In Asia where Christians are only a tiny minority, why can't the Churches combine their meager resources and operate in a more effective way? Is not time ripe for the Christian Churches in Asia to give a common witness on the basis of their fundamental unity?

In the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism, published by the Catholic Church in order to follow up

and implement the directives of Vatican II, the Catholic Church invites all Christians to "cooperate in studying and propagating the Bible, in liturgical studies, in catechesis and higher education, in pastoral care, in evangelization and in their service to charity to a world that is struggling to realize its ideals of justice and peace and love". The Directory also recommends the Catholic Churches in various countries to relate themselves with the National Councils of Churches, and even to join them. Pope John Paul II and the Synod of Bishops for Asia have proposed that "the National Episcopal Conferences in Asia invite other Christian Churches to join in a process of prayer and consultation in order to explore the possibilities of new ecumenical structures and associations to promote Christian unity".

1. Collaboration between the FABC and CCA

At the inaugural assembly of the FABC in Taipei some representatives of the CCA were present, and thereafter some contact between the two bodies was maintained. The collaboration between the FABC's Office of Human Development and CCA's Urban Rural Mission and the Dialogue Units of both bodies might have been the first step. Gradually representatives from the two bodies began to participate in one another's programs. The Staff of the FABC and CCA had a joint meeting in 1997 to get to know each other and to get familiar with the programs and projects of the two bodies and their structures and functioning. Another joint staff meeting is scheduled for the end of the year 2000. The Asian Mission Conference in 1989, organized by the CCA made a recommendation for closer collaboration between the CCA and the FABC and proposed exploring the possibility of a common ecumenical structure combining the two bodies.

2. Asia Ecumenical Committee

In 1993 a Joint Consultation of FABC and CCA, held in Hua Hin, Thailand, made a concrete proposal to set up an Asia Ecumenical Committee as a first step towards searching out a fuller visible unity of the Church in Asia with the following functions: (1) to share information on matters pertaining to Church life, unity and ecumenical relation; (2) to identify, promote and supervise joint programs and establish joint program committees to implement them; (3) to help foster ecumenical relations at the national and local levels. This Consultation also recommended that FABC convene a Consultation of Catholic

Bishops' Conferences in Asia with the participation of the CCA regarding the participation of the Catholic Church in the National Councils of Churches. The proposal to set up an Asia Ecumenical Committee (AEC) was approved by the FABC and CCA in their General Assemblies in 1995, and a Committee consisting of 14 members, 7 from the FABC and 7 from the CCA, was subsequently set up.

The AEC normally meets once a year. Its first meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1997, to chalk out a plan and program within its mandate. The Committee evaluated the collaboration between the FABC and CCA, and proposed to strengthen it. Some common programs and projects were proposed and discussed: A pastoral visit to East Timor, Regional and National Courses for Ecumenical Formation, Issues in Asian Tourism, Consultation on the Membership of the Catholic Church in the NCCs, Joint programs of Dialogue with People of Other Faiths, Joint Publications, Projects for Migrant Workers, Refugees and Internally Displaced Communities in Asia, Booklet for Common Worship. The Second Meeting of the AEC was held in Bali, Indonesia, in 1998. It evaluated the common programs and emphasized that Ecumenical Formation Courses should be given priority. FABC was invited to send a few participants to the Asia Ecumenical Course regularly conducted by the CCA. It was also proposed to organize Ecumenical Formation Courses jointly by the FABC and CCA on a regional level. Consequently, such a common Course was conducted in Bangalore in 1999, and this author was instrumental in organizing it. About 30 participants from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Nepal and India participated in the three-week Course. The Third Meeting of the AEC was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1999. The meeting evaluated the common programs and made concrete proposals for the consideration of the forthcoming General Assemblies of the FABC and CCA.

3. Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU)

AMCU was conceived as a joint-project or seminar of FABC and CCA in order to promote unity of the Churches in Asia. AMCU I was held in Cheung Chau Island in Hong Kong in 1996 in which 42 participants from 15 Asian countries took part, including official representatives from the WCC and Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The topic for study was "Theology of Ecumenism" especially with reference to Christian unity in Asia. The

papers of AMCU I and its report were published through FABC Papers, No. 77 and CTC Bulletin Vol. 14, No. 2. AMCU II was held in Bali, Indonesia, in 1998 on the theme, "Ecumenical Formation as Churches of Asia Move Towards the Next Millennium". There were 47 participants from 14 Asian countries drawn from FABC and CCA constituencies on an equal basis. Though there were papers on a wide range of topics, the focus was ecumenical formation. The workshops tried to develop a common syllabus, which may be used for the various formation programs.

AMCU III will be held in Bangkok in January 2001 and this meeting is planned to explore the possibilities of creating new ecumenical structures in Asia inspired by the invitation of Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter, *Ecclesia in Asia*. Whatever be the ecumenical structures, there is a general principle that the individual Churches would never lose their identity and authority in decision-making. All the same the Churches need a common basis and they have to function within certain framework. The major question before the meeting will be the relationship between the Catholic Church in Asia and the other Churches and the relationship between the FABC and CCA. The Catholic Church could either join the National Councils of Churches, or could create a new ecumenical structure and thus transform the present National Councils, or while maintaining the present NCCs another additional structure or a joint-working group between NCCs and the Catholic Church may be created. There may be still other models. All the possible models need to be explored and evaluated. There is indeed a felt-need and aspiration now for new ecumenical structures in Asia for the new millennium.

4. Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS)

Congress of Asian Theologians is an ecumenical association born in Asia recently. The initiative came mainly from the "Program Unit of Theological Concerns" of the CCA in cooperation with several theological institutions and organizations in Asia. "Its purpose and objectives revolve around the effort to provide "ecumenical space" and a continuing structure for the sharing and cross-fertilization of theological work in Asia and to promote, enhance and facilitate the cooperative process of theological studies and reflection among Asian theologians. In the process it also provides occasion for the development and refinement of Asian theological thinking and the

formation of theological leadership for the ecumenical movement and related institutions in Asia". The CATS is sponsored and supported by several theological institutions, organizations and associations in Asia including the FABC. CATS I met in Suwon, South Korea, in 1997 on the general theme, "Asian Theology in a Changing Asia: Towards an Asian Theological Agenda for the Twenty-first Century". CATS II was held at the Ecumenical Christian Center, Bangalore, India in 1999, around the theme, "Celebrating Life in Asia". CATS III will be held in 2001 in Jogyakarta, Indonesia, and the proposed theme is "Life Together in a Religiously Plural World".

5. Search for New Ecumenical Structures in Asia

In the light of the emerging collaboration between the FABC and the CCA and of the genuine ecumenical spirit of our times and the felt-need and aspiration for new ecumenical structures in Asia in the new millennium, we have to envision new ecumenical relationships, new modes of ecumenical collaboration and new ecumenical structures for the common mission of the Church in Asia today. As a conclusion to this short study on FABC and CCA and their collaboration, let me make a few suggestions or proposals and raise some questions without going into the details:

- 1) Ecumenical Structures are not self-concerned. They are meant to serve the common mission of the Churches and their unity. But is it not true that sometimes structures turn to become obstacles for mission and stifle local initiatives and ecumenical action at the grass-root level. We have to keep in mind that ecumenism is a movement and not an institution or structure. Therefore it seems that structures are to be reduced to the minimum, and have to be flexible and open. Ecumenical structures shall not violate the freedom, autonomy, identity and authority of the Churches.
- 2) In the long run the FABC and CCA should merge and give way to a new Asian ecumenical structure or body or organization. Catholic Church and Other Churches in Asia today cannot afford to operate separately on parallel lines. But such an ecumenical process has to be gradually, patiently and cautiously prepared by several interim steps. However a new Asian ecumenical structure concerning all the Asian Churches is not the end of the ecumenical movement in Asia. It is only the beginning of our common search for closer collaboration and

fellowship and a humble expression of our willingness to respond to the call of the Lord and the signs of the time.

3) In my opinion the first step shall be a process of consultation for creating ecumenical structures at the national level. This consultation can be better held on the Asian level to be organized by the FABC and CCA. It seems that several options and models are possible and available when the Catholic Churches want to be part of the national ecumenical structure as indicated above. All countries need not fall in line along the same model. Concrete situation in each country and the context and nature of the Churches and their actual relationship have to be the determining factors in creating the particular ecumenical structure or organization in each country or region needs. In other words each National Council of Churches can be unique according to the context and needs of the country and the Churches. But the fellowship of Churches needs a common basis. What can be this common basis? "Faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior" is the common basis of the WCC, CCA and other similar ecumenical bodies. Can we exclude any Church from this Asian Ecumenical Fellowship? Should we not try to include the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches in the new fellowship we envisage? At the same time shall we not think of a certain code of conduct (Orthopraxis) on the part of all the member Churches?

4) Shall we not make Joint Staff Meetings of the FABC and CCA an annual feature? Could it not be possible to give more authority and initiative to this joint-staff body in planning common programs and projects of both bodies? Parallel ways of conducting almost identical programs have to be by all means avoided, and such programs are to be organized together sharing the work, resources and expenses on an equal basis.

5) Ecumenical Formation Courses and Programs have to be given a top priority in the programs of both FABC and CCA. Forming the future leaders of the Churches in an ecumenical spirit and atmosphere seems to be very essential for the future of the ecumenical movement in Asia. Hence it seems that these Formation Courses have to be a common project of both bodies and it would be better organized by a team of joint-staff with equal participation and sharing of resources and expenses. Would it not be possible to start regional centers for ecumenical formation, or assigning this task to already existing centers and institutions?

6) Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) is a new ecumenical venture. But Catholic participation in it is, in fact, very minimal. Effort should be made to widen the participation of the Catholic theologians from all over Asia in this ecumenical fellowship of theologians. Ecumenical movement in Asia needs a strong theological basis and support. Search for theological methodologies in Asia has to be a real ecumenical venture.

7) Program of Publications faces a serious crisis both in CCA and FABC. It seems that both bodies were constrained to put some limits to their publications. Would it be possible to have a common publication policy for the two bodies, may be a common Publication Office, and common publication at least in some areas of programs, and may be, common circulation and distribution as far as possible. What I want to say is that duplication of identical publications and unnecessary waste of resources and energies can be avoided to a great extent to the benefit of the Asian Churches and of the ecumenical movement.

These suggestions are very tentative and to be further explored. I hope that some of these issues and questions will be raised in the forthcoming meeting of the AMCU III. Search for New Ecumenical Structures will never end. It will be an ongoing and continuous search. New Structures will soon become old and outdated, calling for continuous renewal and reform under the power of the Spirit.

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